
CENTERING WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Evaluative Research on Oxfam's COVID-19 Response in Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya (Synthesis Report)

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Oxfam advocates for transforming the global humanitarian system to shift power to local/national actors. Concurrent with Oxfam's dedication to local humanitarian leadership (LHL) has been a commitment to women's rights organizations (WROs). Based on multi-country evaluative research, this synthesis report examines how well Oxfam has upheld its LHL commitments in its COVID-19 response via its WRO partnerships and situates the analysis in the broader context of pandemic response. Sharing insights from Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya (case studies shared separately), the report explores the challenges WROs are facing, the ways Oxfam supports them, and the areas where Oxfam can improve.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this research was to understand the broader context of the humanitarian response to COVID-19 from the perspective of women’s rights organizations (WROs) and to understand how well Oxfam has upheld local humanitarian leadership (LHL) commitments in relation to its partnerships with WROs. From the literature, as well as from Oxfam’s experience in Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya, it is evident that WROs have been key figures in the COVID-19 response while also managing acute challenges around lack of recognition, funding, and exclusion from decision-making spaces. Local organizations, including WROs, have continued their work in humanitarian response, shouldering even more as international actors have reduced their participation. As noted in the three case studies that accompany this synthesis report (published separately),¹ WROs provided crucial response activities in ways that were additive to Oxfam’s efforts, such as embedding self-care in their response in Colombia, gender-specific expertise on legal issues in Iraq, and access to urban communities in Kenya.

OXFAM AND LHL

The Oxfam Confederation has long considered itself a champion of LHL. Oxfam is working to transform the humanitarian system so that “local humanitarian actors (whether civil society, government or both) [are] leading humanitarian response and ensuring it is fast and appropriate and meeting the needs of the affected population” (Kergoat et al. 2020, 4). LHL is often connected to the concept of localization, the process by which local and national actors become more engaged in humanitarian efforts. Localization can refer to partnerships or collaborations with international actors that do not necessarily foster the leadership of local and national organizations, but the emphasis at Oxfam generally, and in this report in particular, is on *leadership* aspects of LHL (Jayasinghe et al. 2020, 12). Because LHL is situated within a patriarchal system that tends to dismiss gender issues, a feminist approach is necessary to shed light on the work of WROs.

In 2019 Oxfam America identified six principles that should underpin LHL. These principles address formal LHL commitments, such as the Charter for Change, the Grand Bargain, the Pledge for Change, and the Principles of Partnerships (adopted by the Global Humanitarian Platform). The specific principles are (1) partnerships, (2) capacity sharing, (3) funding, (4) public engagement, (5) influencing, and (6) gender justice. These principles can interrelate and depend on one another; for example, partnerships can lead to increased funding, which can support capacity-sharing opportunities, which can lead to additional funding opportunities. With regard to the sixth principle, gender justice, we focus on the experiences of WROs for the following reasons: WROs are often sidelined from the global humanitarian system and are thus denied access to resources and opportunities to influence decision-making (Jayasinghe et al. 2020). Yet they are often first responders in humanitarian crises, as they have been during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, during the pandemic, support to WROs—as well as to groups working on gender issues—was among the first to get cut. If organizations like Oxfam are not pursuing their commitments in relation to WROs, that is a deep gap considering Oxfam’s aspiration to be a gender-just organization, guided by feminist principles. Table 1 shows how this research will center the role of WROs in relation to the LHL principles.

Table 1. Centering the Experiences of WROs: Evaluating Oxfam’s Support

Oxfam LHL Principles	Centering WROs
Partnerships	
Partnerships between international actors and local actors are “as equal as possible,” with collaborative decision-making, shared learning, and long-term partnerships.	What were WROs’ experiences in partnering with Oxfam during the COVID-19 response in terms of opportunities for collaboration and shared learning? Were partnerships created to be long term?
Capacity Sharing	
International actors prioritize the capacity development needs of local actors, as specified by local actors themselves, and prevent the negative impact of recruiting local/national staff during emergencies.	What were the capacity-sharing needs of WROs, and how were they addressed by Oxfam during the COVID-19 response?
Funding	
International actors pass 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors, including overhead costs, and are transparent about such funds.	What were the funding challenges experienced by WROs during the COVID-19 pandemic? How did Oxfam respond to the funding needs of WROs?
Public Engagement	
International actors facilitate direct connections to donors, make visible the role of local and national actors, and acknowledge their contribution in any publications or communication materials.	Have the efforts of WROs during the COVID-19 pandemic been made visible by Oxfam? Did Oxfam facilitate connections to donors?
Influencing	
International actors recognize the responsibility of local and national actors to lead in humanitarian emergencies and help enable them to participate fully in decision-making mechanisms and coordination forums.	What has been the experience of WROs in terms of engagement in decision-making mechanisms and coordination forums? How has Oxfam been able to support them?
Gender Justice	
International actors actively engage with women’s organizations and gender justice, prioritizing their leadership and voice.	This area will be examined via the previous principles.

WROS AND COVID-19 RESPONSE

WROs have long responded to humanitarian emergencies, and the COVID-19 global pandemic is no different. If anything, WROs—like other local and national actors—are stepping in to fill in gaps left by governments and the international community. WROs provide basic needs such as food and water, ensure that gender concerns such as violence against women are part of pandemic response plans, allow women to access services and come together virtually, and raise awareness within communities on how to protect against the virus.

Yet WROs are facing challenges on multiple fronts. Their work continues to go unfunded (or underfunded) and unrecognized by both governments and international actors, a gap that further

renders them vulnerable in light of a shrinking civic space and the backlash against women’s rights. Accessing decision-making spaces to influence COVID-19 response plans also remains a struggle for WROs across the globe. Overall, the structures of power within the humanitarian system continue to place undue pressure on WROs and serve as barriers to their participation. Such barriers may consist of requirements related to formal registration of organizations, complex funding proposals, and expectations of humanitarian technical knowledge at the expense of gender justice and women’s rights, or they may operate more subtly by affecting who gets invited into spaces of power.

FINDINGS

Using a feminist approach, this report combined a literature review with case studies from Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya to examine the experiences of WROs responding to the emergencies caused by the pandemic and evaluated Oxfam’s support of its WRO partners. Despite the diversity of contexts and the different approaches taken by the researchers, the findings reveal key commonalities in how Oxfam—and perhaps other international actors—can improve in their support of WROs responding to humanitarian emergencies (Table 2; see Table 7 for a more detailed breakdown).

Table 2. Recommendations for Oxfam and Other International Actors

Recommendations for Oxfam and Other International Actors	
PARTNERSHIPS	
Partnerships between international actors and local actors are “as equal as possible,” with collaborative decision-making, shared learning, and long-term partnerships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build trust: Trust is not automatically built into partnerships. To flourish, trust requires training and explicit attention. It also requires a recognition of power and efforts to share power within partnerships. Trust also involves a measure of vulnerability, which can be achieved only if partners have space to make mistakes with one another and are able to tell one another the truth. • Ensure mutual accountability and transparency: Partnerships should be based on mutual support and need, as well as reciprocal accountability. International actors should seek ways to be more transparent in partnerships, such as having frequent and open communication channels, increasing clarity on how decisions are made, and integrating WRO partners in grant proposals early in the process. • Strive for long-term and flexible partnerships: Working on women’s rights and gender justice issues can take time, so it is important for international actors to move toward more long-term partnerships with WROs. Moving to longer time frames can also help ensure the sustainability of local organizations. Partners must integrate flexibility so that WROs can shape the projects they are working on, thereby creating more of a partnership instead of a donor-grantee relationship. • Establish learning exchanges: Embed learning opportunities within partnerships and ensure that learning is seen as a mutual process by Oxfam and WROs, as well as between partners. • Embrace the nexus: Move away from artificial, siloed approaches that create divisions between humanitarian, development, and peace actors to better honor the work being done by WROs.

CAPACITY SHARING	
International actors prioritize the capacity-development needs of local actors, as specified by local actors themselves, and prevent the negative impact of recruiting local/national staff during emergencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move from building to sharing: The emphasis on capacity building signals that WROs and other local actors lack something or need to be fixed, which is problematic and colonialist. Oxfam and the international sector should move toward capacity-sharing activities that both embrace learning exchanges and see WROs and local actors from a position of expertise. • Engage in dialogue and collaborate: Oxfam and other international actors should work more with WROs to identify what activities around capacity would be most useful to them and offer learning opportunities (such as peer-to-peer exchanges).
FUNDING	
International actors pass 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors, including overhead costs, and are transparent about such funds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide WROs with long-term, flexible, direct funding: LHL has led to a call for high-quality funding, which is still relevant. WROs experience serious funding challenges that need to be recognized and addressed by Oxfam and other international actors. These funds should include indirect cost recovery funds to cover administrative costs. • Value gender work: Oxfam and other international actors must value the role WROs play in humanitarian response, particularly their women’s rights and gender justice approach. • Ensure diversity: Ensure that all WROs of all sizes have equal opportunities to access funding and other resources from Oxfam and other donors.
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	
International actors facilitate direct connections to donors, make visible the role of local and national actors, and acknowledge their contribution in any publications or communication materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate access to donors: Oxfam and other international actors can help facilitate direct access between donors and WROs (and other local actors). This facilitation could include support on how to interact with donors as well as language support. • Shine a light on local actors’ work: WROs need to make their efforts more publicly visible, but doing so takes time and resources. Oxfam and other international actors can provide support to amplify and recognize the work of WROs.
INFLUENCING	
International actors recognize the responsibility of local and national actors to lead in humanitarian emergencies, and help enable them to participate fully in decision-making mechanisms and coordination forums.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support participation: Oxfam has made use of its position in the humanitarian sector to facilitate WROs’ direct access to coordination and decision-making spaces. Oxfam and other international actors need to provide more of this support. • Act in solidarity: WROs are often attacked for their human rights and gender justice work. International actors like Oxfam can and should use their influence to take risks and use their brands to protect WROs’ important work.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This evaluative research report highlights the work that WROs have been doing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, looking at their strengths and the challenges they face, as well as at how Oxfam has been trying to support their work. By adopting a feminist approach that pays close attention to unequal gender norms, incorporates an intersectional lens, and delves into power dynamics, this study provides a clear assessment on the ways that Oxfam—and other international actors—can better support WROs involved in humanitarian response.

A feminist approach also entails a commitment to ensuring that findings can be used to catalyze social change and activism. The recommendations in Table 2 offer several practical though perhaps challenging suggestions on how that can be achieved, from including indirect cost recovery for partners to creating more equitable learning exchanges where Oxfam and partners can learn from each other. Additional practical suggestions no doubt exist, and we recommend that Oxfam and other international actors create space for frank dialogue with their WRO partners to discuss other ways they can be supported.

These recommendations cannot be divorced from the report’s feminist underpinnings, which are in line with Oxfam’s commitment to feminist principles. Tied to these feminist principles should be an equal commitment to a decolonial approach that unpacks power dynamics across the Global North and South as an ongoing process of mutual learning and solidarity. LHL implies a decolonial approach that seeks to end the idea that international organizations are “experts” compared with local ones. As shared by Hero Anwar, the program director of REACH, a humanitarian organization in Iraq, “the path to local leadership and the path to decolonizing aid appear to be one.”

More discussions need to happen internally on what committing to a feminist and decolonial approach means and engaging with the discomfort that will ensue when a global actor such as Oxfam casts a critical lens on its work and the power it wields. Such discussions could even reflect on whether it is possible for feminist and decolonial approaches can be incorporated in how the humanitarian and development sectors are currently constructed, or whether the sectors themselves need to be dismantled. If so, this would require Oxfam and other international actors to rethink their roles and position in these structures, including how the status quo may inadvertently perpetuate unequal dynamics with local actors such as WROs. Conversations also must occur between Oxfam and its partners—namely, WROs—on practices that could be incorporated to improve relationships. Lastly, it is important to recognize that Oxfam is just one actor in the sector, and several of the recommendations cannot be carried out by Oxfam alone. Changes to better support WROs in the humanitarian sector need to be responded to jointly by a diverse set of actors, ranging from international nongovernmental organizations, United Nations agencies, donors, governments, and others.

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this evaluative research project is to understand how well Oxfam has upheld its commitments to principles of local humanitarian leadership (LHL) in relation to the COVID-19 response of women’s rights organizations (WROs). Focusing on three countries, Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya, this study unites research and evaluation to allow us to situate the Oxfam experience in the broader context of the humanitarian response to COVID-19 as well as to provide primary data that speak to the lived reality of WROs.

BACKGROUND: OXFAM AND LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Over the past decade, Oxfam² has called for transforming the global humanitarian system to shift the power balance to local and national humanitarian actors as well as for making deep changes in the values, culture, and language of the aid system (Cairns 2012). Oxfam is a signatory to the Charter for Change,³ the Grand Bargain,⁴ and the Pledge for Change,⁵ all of which lay out specific targets to which Oxfam has agreed to hold itself accountable in its commitment to LHL.⁶ LHL occurs when “local humanitarian actors (whether civil society, government, or both) lead humanitarian action, ensuring that it is fast and appropriate and meets the needs of the affected population” (Kergoat et al. 2020, 4). While LHL and localization are often used interchangeably, this evaluative research project intentionally distinguishes LHL from localization, as the latter has been critiqued for disempowering local actors by emphasizing *partnerships with* as opposed to *leadership by* local actors (Wall and Hedlund 2016; Jayasinghe et al. 2020).

In 2019 Oxfam America identified six principles that should underpin LHL (see Table 3).⁷ These principles address formal LHL commitments and Oxfam’s principles of partnership, adding a focus on influencing (or advocacy), one of Oxfam’s areas of expertise, as well as paying particular attention to gender justice, an issue that is missing from the Charter for Change, the Grand Bargain, and the Pledge for Change.⁸

Table 3. LHL Principles

Partnerships
Partnerships between international actors and local actors are “as equal as possible,” with collaborative decision-making, shared learning, and long-term partnerships.
Capacity Sharing
International actors prioritize the capacity-development needs of local actors, as specified by local actors themselves, and prevent the negative impact of recruiting local/national staff during emergencies.
Funding
International actors pass 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors, including overhead costs, and are transparent about such funds.
Public Engagement
International actors facilitate direct connections to donors, make visible the role of local and national actors, and acknowledge their contribution in any publications or communication materials.
Influencing

International actors recognize the responsibility of local and national actors to lead in humanitarian emergencies and help enable them to participate fully in decision-making mechanisms and coordination forums.
Gender Justice
International actors actively engage with women’s organizations and gender justice, prioritizing their leadership and voice.

With regard to the sixth principle, gender justice, we focus on the experiences of WROs for the following reasons: WROs are often sidelined from the global humanitarian system and thus are denied access to resources and opportunities to influence decision-making (Jayasinghe et al 2020). Yet they are often first responders in humanitarian crises, including during COVID-19. Indeed, as donors shifted their priorities to support relief during the pandemic, support to WROs—as well as to other organizations focused on gender issues—were among the first to get cut, as the case studies will show. While the lack of support for gender-focused organizations is not unique to the humanitarian sector, it still represents a problem. If organizations like Oxfam are not pursuing their commitments in relation to WROs, that is a deep gap, considering Oxfam’s aspiration to be a gender-just organization guided by feminist principles (Oxfam 2020a). Oxfam itself has acknowledged this support gap in terms of its engagement with WROs:

Oxfam does not consistently prioritize engagement with WROs and gender-interested organizations, despite knowing that they are often among the first to respond locally. As such, Oxfam does not prioritize capacity programming that could enhance humanitarian skills and capabilities, strengthen these organizations/movements and recognize their critical role in the humanitarian system (Kergoat et al. 2020, 23).

We seek to avoid furthering that marginalization by placing WROs at the center of our analysis.

It is important to acknowledge two inherent tensions in this report. First, this report combines (1) a research lens that looks at external sources to determine how WROs responded to and were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) an internal evaluation process that looks at how Oxfam supported WROs in the response to the pandemic via case studies from Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya. We are thus using Oxfam’s principles on LHL to make sense of and understand the work of others outside the Confederation in order to tie it in with how we understand our own work. Yet we argue that Oxfam’s principles are not unique to the organization; they draw on generally agreed commitments on LHL and broadly apply to how international organizations can better support the leadership of local and national organizations.

Second, and arguably more importantly, this work centers the experiences of WROs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic but uses Oxfam’s LHL principles as a measurement guide. As mentioned, the general nature of the principles makes it difficult for those supporting LHL to argue against them. Yet it could also be argued that it is inappropriate to use the lens of an international organization to make sense of our impact. We recommend that Oxfam rethink these principles in dialogue with the WROs they partner with (and indeed, with local and national actors in general) as a form of critical review based on findings from this evaluative research project. For the purposes of this report, we propose reframing the LHL principles so that they center not on international organizations but on the experiences of WROs (Table 4).

Table 4. Centering the Experiences of WROs: Evaluating Oxfam’s Support

Oxfam LHL Principles	Centering WROs
Partnerships	
Partnerships between international actors and local actors are “as equal as possible,” with collaborative decision-making, shared learning, and long-term partnerships.	What were WROs’ experiences in partnering with Oxfam, during the COVID-19 response, in terms of opportunities for collaboration and shared learning? Were partnerships created to be long term?

Capacity Sharing	
International actors prioritize the capacity development needs of local actors, as specified by local actors themselves, and prevent the negative impact of recruiting local/national staff during emergencies.	What were the capacity-sharing needs of WROs, and how were they addressed by Oxfam during the COVID-19 response?
Funding	
International actors pass 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors, including overhead costs, and are transparent about such funds.	What were the funding challenges experienced by WROs during the COVID-19 pandemic? How did Oxfam respond to the funding needs of WROs?
Public Engagement	
International actors facilitate direct connections to donors, make visible the role of local and national actors, and acknowledge their contribution in any publications or communication materials.	Have the efforts of WROs during the COVID-19 pandemic been made visible by Oxfam? Did Oxfam facilitate connections to donors?
Influencing	
International actors recognize the responsibility of local and national actors to lead in humanitarian emergencies and help enable them to participate fully in decision-making mechanisms and coordination forums.	What has been the experience of WROs in terms of engagement in decision-making mechanisms and coordination forums? How has Oxfam been able to support them?
Gender Justice	
International actors actively engage with women's organizations and gender justice, prioritizing their leadership and voice.	This area will be examined via the previous principles.

OXFAM AND WROS

DEFINING WROS

The Oxfam Confederation lacks a harmonized definition of WROs, as does the humanitarian sector overall. This lack of a consistent definition makes it difficult to track impact, participation, and funding and impedes accountability for crisis-affected women and girls (IASC 2021, 1). Who comes up with that definition, however, matters. Is it correct for international NGOs and other international entities, especially those that do not define themselves as WROs, to hold the power of definition and to impose that definition on decisions regarding funding, partnerships, capacity sharing, and other important matters?

Box 1. Why the term “women’s rights organizations” . . . ?

. . . and not feminist organizations?

Part of the reason we use “women’s rights organizations” in this report is that is the term used extensively in the humanitarian sector. The term “women-led organizations” also appears, though women’s rights organizations and women-led organizations are not the same thing. A women-led organization can be a women’s rights organization, but if it does not have gender justice at the core of its mission, it is not a women’s rights organization.

The term “feminist organizations” appears less frequently. Although “women’s rights organizations” and “feminist organizations” are used synonymously in some cases, it is worth thinking about the possible implications of a choice between the two terms. The line between women’s rights and feminism might be thin, but if organizations choose to define themselves as either women’s rights or feminist organizations, then more research should be conducted to understand how these nuanced distinctions between concepts lead to differential impact and access. One explanation of the difference between women’s rights and feminism relies on the outward orientation of feminist work, where “feminism” implies a radical, transformative approach to women’s rights that brings in a movement-building, local to global lens to the advancement of gender justice. Women’s rights and feminism are therefore interconnected, with this external focus being a key difference (Reilly 2007, 121). Nonetheless whether an organization is a women’s rights organization or a feminist one depends on how they choose to self-identify.

Oxfam Canada (OCA), an Oxfam affiliate that identifies itself as a WRO, created a definition when conducting a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on WROs (Zaaroura and Fox 2021, 14.):

We define women’s rights and feminist organizations and actors as local and national organizations, activists and movements which are women-led/governed, whose core mandate is advancing women’s rights and gender justice, and [which] have a rights-based, transformative, and intersectional approach. These can be organized and registered organizations, but also loose networks of women’s rights/feminist activists. We recognize the importance of a transformative approach and an intersectional analysis and therefore have made clear in our outreach that our definition of women’s rights and feminist organizations includes those that support and advance the rights of LGBTQIA2s+ people, racialized women and girls, indigenous women and girls, etc.

This definition is specific about the mission of WROs and creates space for organizations that are led by genders other than those that identify as women. Oxfam Colombia also has a feminist rights-based approach to their partners, stating that they work with grassroots organizations with a focus on human rights and gender justice (Oxfam n.d. “Colombia”).

Other international entities in the humanitarian sector have offered other definitions. UN Women’s definition is like that of Oxfam Canada, though it emphasizes that such an organization should “self-identify” as a WRO, which could avoid the problematic power dynamics mentioned earlier in this section (UN Women 2020, 37):

1) An organization that self-identifies as a woman’s rights organization with the primary focus of advancing gender equality, women’s empowerment and human rights; or 2) an organization that has, as part of its mission statement, the advancement of women’s and girls’ interests and rights (or where ‘women’, ‘girls’, ‘gender’ or local language equivalents are prominent in their mission statement); or 3) an organization that has, as part of its mission statement or objectives, to challenge and transform gender inequalities (unjust rules), unequal power relations and promoting positive social norms.

CARE defines WROs as having a women’s rights and gender justice mandate and also requires that two-thirds of board and management staff and/or volunteers identify as women (Fuhrman and Rhodes 2020, 3).

And how do self-identified WROs define themselves? Looking at a small sample of WRO members of the Feminist Humanitarian Network, a network whose membership is composed of about 80 percent of WROs located in the Global South, shows a similar focus on mandate and leadership (FHN 2021).⁹ Some organizations are women founded and women led, but not all. All of the organizations in the sample, however, have missions that include a focus on gender equality and gender equity issues (such as reproductive rights, economic justice, movement building, climate justice, and land rights), working with women, girls, and members of LGBTQIA2s+ communities (see Annex for a list of the FHN members examined and their corresponding missions).

This evaluative research adopts UN Women’s definition of WROs, both for its broader scope compared with CARE’s, which allows for additional flexibility, and for its emphasis on self-identification. The focus here is on local and national WROs, not global ones, unless otherwise noted in the text, in line with definitions of such organizations within LHL. For local and national organizations, this research uses the definitions adopted by the Grand Bargain for local and national organizations: “Organizations engaged in relief that are headquartered and operating in their own aid recipient country and that are not affiliated to an international and non-governmental organization” (Alliance for Empowering Partnership 2019). Being clear about the definition of local and national organizations is important; as noted by research by Oxfam and Tufts University (Robillard et al 2020, 10), “these definitions are not consistently applied or agreed upon in the broader discourse” and are subject to contestation. Using this definition means that the focus will be mainly formal, registered WROs and will exclude the work of informal and unregistered women’s groups.

However, this research will adapt the definition to include a fourth category: women-led organizations. While developing the idea for this research, colleagues based in Iraq noted that a definition that focused mainly on women’s rights and gender justice would not work in their context, as it is not always prudent for organizations to openly espouse a feminist and gender justice mission. They requested that the research include women-led organizations, even if their mission is not obviously focused on women’s rights. Because part of Oxfam’s focus is to support women leaders and not just WROs, the research team decided to expand the focus accordingly in the case of Iraq. The report will make it clear when information from Iraq concerns WROs versus women-led organizations.

FEMINIST APPROACH

Guided by a feminist approach, the research draws on several ideas derived from scholarship on feminist methodology (Fonow and Cook 2005; Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006):

Gender norms are shaped by unequal and patriarchal power relations that can promote discrimination against women and other gender minorities. Gender norms, by their nature, are so embedded in our structures and systems that they often go unquestioned, perpetuating marginalization. Research can uncover and interrogate such gender norms so that they are better understood and even transformed. By focusing on the perspectives of women’s rights organizations, a type of organization that historically and globally has been underfunded (Dolker 2021), attacked (CIVICUS 2018), and marginalized in decision-making spaces, both in and out of the humanitarian sector, this evaluative research tackles this unequal ground.

An intersectional approach is needed to recognize people’s multiple identities and interrelated forms of discrimination. Incorporating an intersectional approach in our work involved making sure that we are aware of different identity groups (such as indigenous women’s groups or LGBTQIA2s+ organizations) and made efforts to include them in our analysis or acknowledge their absence. This intersectional approach has also meant that we needed to be flexible and expand our focus to

include both women's rights organizations and women-led organizations in the case of Iraq, to be responsive to contextual factors.

An intersectional approach also requires us to be mindful of the history of patriarchy and colonialism that underpins the development industry, including the history of international actors like Oxfam. This entails that Oxfam teams approach this work from a point of solidarity and as an ally that is willing to learn and transform and that they continue to advocate for local leadership (Kagal and Latchford 2020).

The research process itself can be imbued with unequal dynamics. It is especially critical to be aware of and unpack power dynamics in research on LHL, considering LHL's focus on shifting power and correcting inequalities in the humanitarian system and the role of power dynamics between local and international actors. We were also acutely aware that research and evaluation can constitute acts of power by directing how analyses were constructed and decisions were made in all areas of the project. Power dynamics were present throughout the project, affecting the relationships between Oxfam affiliates and country teams,¹⁰ between Oxfam and external researchers, and between researchers and those interviewed. We attempted to avoid unequal power dynamics by fostering a country-led, feminist, participatory approach to this research, where those involved were encouraged to co-create this project throughout all stages of the research process.

Staying true to a feminist process involved embracing the different contextual approaches each country took to the research. Research design choices were made based on each country's unique set of opportunities and challenges and what they considered the best way to gather information to inform the research questions. The research team in Colombia decided to do a deep dive with four WROs, one of which included Oxfam Colombia, to have an intimate look at their experiences in responding to the pandemic. The Iraq research team was led by a WRO, Women Empowerment Organization, that adapted a mixed-methods approach, combining an extensive survey that researched 100 organizations alongside semi-structured interviews with 23 organizations. Kenya's research team decided to take a middle approach and focused on interviews with 15 organizations. Following a feminist approach meant that the evaluative research team honored context and co-creation with those closest to areas of impact. By embracing this diversity and comparing similarities and differences across the cases, this research attempts to lessen unequal power differences as it is guided by the experiences of WROs (Dallimore 2000).

Research should be used to promote social change and lead to advances in gender equality. Through this research, we hope to signal what needs to change to better incorporate LHL principles in the humanitarian system, and especially within Oxfam. Understanding the challenges facing WROs across the three case studies, and how Oxfam has helped WROs or not, can better inform our practices going forward, better center women's rights in our work, and be accountable to the research participants involved in this project.

As such the primary audience is the research participants from the three case studies—mainly WROs—who generously shared their insights with the evaluative research team. Our aim is to ensure that they can access the information shared by other WROs in this section. In addition, as this evaluative research is informed by a feminist approach and therefore wishes to provoke social change and activism, another important audience is the Oxfam Confederation. We seek to inform its learning and to generate discussions internally on what needs to change to better support WROs. We also intend to share the findings in global-level panels on LHL and localization to potentially influence other INGOs, UN agencies, and other international actors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research is guided by three main questions, which will be answered via an overarching literature review and three country case studies focusing on Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya. In both the literature review and the case studies, the LHL principles will serve as guideposts in the analysis.

- 1 WROs' experiences during COVID-19. What has been the organizational experience of WROs during COVID-19 in humanitarian contexts in relation to the LHL principles?
- 2 WROs' perspectives on Oxfam. From the perspective of WROs to what extent did Oxfam uphold its LHL commitments during COVID-19 in relation to the LHL principles?
- 3 Evaluation of Oxfam. How well has Oxfam upheld its commitments to LHL, and what were the challenges and successes?

The research questions are designed to provide a general understanding of the efforts and challenges experienced by WROs responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (based on sources both internal and external to Oxfam) and then to assess specifically how well Oxfam is doing in terms of supporting WRO partners in such endeavors. The findings are meant to be used to spark improvements, both within Oxfam and within the humanitarian sector, in support for WROs and recognition of the work they do.

STRUCTURE OF REPORT

The report begins with a literature review that examines the WRO experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, using the LHL principles mentioned earlier to frame the analysis. The review focuses predominantly on reports produced by WROs, Oxfam, and other international organizations. The report then presents an overview of the case studies from Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya to get a further sense of what WROs' experiences were during COVID-19, how Oxfam (in their view) upheld the LHL principles, and what Oxfam has done well and what challenges remain in terms of supporting WROs in humanitarian contexts. Finally, the concluding chapter ties together the overall takeaways from the literature review with the evaluative component on how well Oxfam has supported WROs in the COVID-19 response in Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya via the LHL principles.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research used several methods depending on the context and what was achievable in each country. Table 5 includes the methods and sample sizes.

Table 5. Methods across case studies

Country	Methods	Sample sizes	Oxfam partners
Colombia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Group interviews • Semi-structured interviews • Non-participant observation • Validation workshop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 organizations (3 WROs and Oxfam Colombia^a) • 69 people (56 women and 13 men) 	All 3 WROs are Oxfam partners
Iraq	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk review • Semi-structured interviews • Survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 organizations interviewed (20 of which are WOs) • 100 women's organizations surveyed 	Five WROs/WLOs are Oxfam Partners
Kenya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review • Semi-structured interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 organizations (14 WROs and Oxfam in Kenya) 	Five WROs are Oxfam partners

^a Oxfam Colombia describes itself as a feminist organization.

As mentioned, a literature review was conducted to understand the external context in which Oxfam operates and to generate more information on how WROs functioned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings from the country case studies and the literature review were combined in an overall synthesis analysis, which can be found later in this document.

The case studies were conducted by the following researchers or organizations:

- Colombia: Juanita Jaramillo and Paula Andrea Uribe, feminist independent consultants
- Iraq: Women Empowerment Organization, an Iraq-based WRO
- Kenya: Development Initiatives, global research organization

LIMITATION

A major limitation involves the fact that this report was written by an Oxfam staff member. Therefore, despite the best intentions, it can be argued that the evaluative analysis is less critical than it might be if written by someone outside the organization. We hope the case studies, which are written by external partners, can help address this potential conflict of interest. In addition, the research included interviews with Oxfam partners, who may have believed they needed to be complimentary toward Oxfam to continue to receive funding. The research team was encouraged to allow interviews to be conducted anonymously, depending on the comfort of the participants.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW: COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE BY WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Much has been written about the devastating impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on communities worldwide: loss of life, serious illness, inability to access resources and basic needs, and a complete halt to social life. Responding to humanitarian emergencies—not only the pandemic itself but also other emergencies that arose before or during the pandemic—has become even more challenging than before, as organizations and governments struggle to provide aid while also protecting themselves, their staff, and the communities in which they work.

This section seeks to understand the experiences of WROs involved in responding to the COVID-19. It delves into the activities WROs undertook to respond to this unprecedented humanitarian emergency and identifies some of their successes and challenges. This section relies on a literature review to uncover answers to the above questions, with an emphasis on sources produced by actors outside of Oxfam.¹¹

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS AND HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES

There is ample research noting differences in how humanitarian emergencies impact different genders and in how different genders respond to such emergencies. Studies have found that women's needs often go ignored in humanitarian responses. The humanitarian system thus needs to better integrate gender considerations, with a specific focus on women, into its structure.

WROs have played a key role in supporting the needs of women in the communities they serve and can thus help highlight and fill the gaps in humanitarian response in terms of women's needs and priorities. There is evidence that engaging with WROs can lead to more gender-sensitive humanitarian programming. The IASC Gender Accountability Framework Report by UN Women (2021b) noted that humanitarian response plans are more likely to include gender-specific provisions—like support for gender-based violence mitigation, women's livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive health—if local women's organizations are consulted (UN Women 2021b, 13). And within the frame of LHL, there have been calls by entities such as ActionAid, IASC, and the Feminist Humanitarian Network, among others, for WROs and women-led organizations to be better integrated into humanitarian processes. An ActionAid report states that “if women and women-led organizations are not supported to lead within localization processes there is the risk that the needs of communities will not be met, and their exclusion will reinforce structural inequalities and maintain the vulnerability of their communities” (Parke 2020, 5).

WROS AS FIRST RESPONDERS

There has been a wave of reports on local humanitarian organizations' response to COVID-19, of which a smaller subset has focused on WROs. Often produced by international actors, such as Oxfam, Care, ActionAid, and UN agencies, as opposed to local actors, they nonetheless give a detailed picture of the experiences of WROs responding to the pandemic. A notable exception is a

series of case studies produced by the Feminist Humanitarian Network, led by WROs themselves (FHN 2021).

The different ways WROs have responded to the pandemic tend to fall within the following categories: (1) providing basic needs such as food, sexual and reproductive health items, and personal protective equipment needed in the pandemic; (2) ensuring that pandemic responses carried out by local and national authorities included women and often-ignored categories such as domestic workers and sex workers; (3) creating innovative ways to continue original programming such as supporting survivors of gender-based violence via WhatsApp and other mobile applications; and (4) awareness raising for women, girls, and other marginalized identities on how to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (Owino 2023). Table 6 includes examples of WROs responding in each category.

Table 6: WROs’ responses to COVID-19

Providing basic needs	A feminist activist organization, Eгна Legna Besidet, supported migrant Ethiopian women domestic workers in Lebanon and provided rapid response to thousands of women domestic workers forced to leave their places of work due to the pandemic (Eгна Legna Besidet n.d.; Brown 2022, 12).
	A feminist organization in Bangladesh, Naripokkho, mobilized its volunteers and activities to support at-risk women and girls such as sex workers. For example, Naripokkho gave 1,500 BDT to support 100 “floating” sex workers during the pandemic for three months, as well about three months’ worth of food to middle-class women-headed households (Badabon Sangho and FHN 2020).
Integrating gender in local and state pandemic response plans	In Malawi, “the appointment of a COVID-19 task force comprised just 19 percent women, promoted women’s rights organizations to demand equal representation” (UN Women 2021b, 3).
	In Tunisia, “the Association of Democratic Women successful lobbied the High Council of the Judicial System for court cases on violence again women to be treated as essential” (UN Women 2021b, 5).
Necessity fueling innovation: Transitioning services online	In Colombia, Red Nacional de Mujeres and Global Network of Women Peacebuilders organized regular virtual workshops with local women in Cauca and Tolima to provide digital training in how to use different communication platforms, as well as to discuss the progress of gender provisions at the local level of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (GNWP 2021a, 6).
	In Kenya, the Refugee Consortium of Kenya reported that they were able to offer services virtually (such as tele-counseling and virtual court sessions) to support the needs of their communities (Pastoralist Girls Initiative and FHN 2020, 9).
Advocacy and awareness raising	“In Jordan, Women’s Leadership Councils composed mostly of refugee women have been spreading awareness in their communities on health precautions and on positive communications to curb psychological stress and domestic violence” (Furhman and Rhodes 2020, 25).
	“In Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar District, women’s networks and self-organized groups have led community outreach and awareness-raising sessions on COVID-19 and worked with women in the communities to produce and distribute face coverings, in both Rohingya and host communities” (Furhman and Rhodes 2020, 25).

CHALLENGES

Although WROs all over the world have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, they are facing several challenges that impact the way that they work. Shrinking civic space, for instance, is preventing or slowing WROs from being able to access funds from international donors when they need it (Badabon Sangho and the Feminist Humanitarian Network 2021, 7). Yet when the pandemic was underway, “WROs and WLOs [women-led organizations] [stepped] up to fill gaps in state service provision, often with little recognition and at significant cost” (ActionAid 2021, 11).

Local and national WROs often suffer from the same discrimination that local and national humanitarian organizations face—the assumption that they lack the capacity to successfully conduct humanitarian response or do not have adequate knowledge of humanitarian principles (Dijkzeul 2021, 3).¹² WROs are “unrecognized first responders and humanitarian actors,” yet they are perceived to lack the required expertise in humanitarian response (Njeri and Daigle 2022, 15). The humanitarian sector needs to question this attitude. While WROs should know about and follow humanitarian principles and other sectorwide standards, there needs to be a more inclusive understanding of what a humanitarian actor looks like and does.

There may be a tendency to consult WROs only about “women’s issues.” For instance, “women and girls are less included by other clusters in consultations about issues such as logistics, housing, or camp governance” (Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation 2020, 22). This tendency has both positives and negatives. On the one hand, “women’s issues” are often either sidelined or ignored, so raising the profile of matters that pertain specifically to women and girls is useful. On the other hand, such an approach could perpetuate the idea that WROs have no contributions to make beyond “women’s issues” or promote a narrow view of what constitutes “women’s issues.”

One result of the pandemic reported by WROs globally was a de-prioritization of their essential and strategic gender programming in favor of an increased focus on immediate emergency support (Kvinna till Kvinna 2020, 4; Development Initiatives 2022a, 17; Zaaroura and Fox 2021, 7), which the case studies will further detail. WROs also faced operational challenges related to COVID-19, such as being unable to pay staff owing to delays in bank processing or loss of funding (Zaaroura and Fox 2021, 7). Furthermore, many WROs, particularly smaller ones, had difficulties transitioning to virtual work because they lacked digital infrastructure and worked with communities that do not have ready access to the Internet.

Lastly, reports on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on WROs also noted the importance of care responsibilities and the critical need for self-care. WROs, like many other organizations, suffered from a dramatic increase in workload owing to the stark needs of the communities in which they work, while also experiencing a reduction of staff, who needed to step away from their work in WROs to respond to the needs of their families. A report by Badabon Sangho and the Feminist Humanitarian Network (2020, 5) in Bangladesh found that WROs lost many of their women volunteers because of the increase in workload created by family members living at home who otherwise would have been working outside. Self-care is also increasingly important in the face of all the challenges described, pointing to the need for mental health care services and psychosocial support for WROs working on the frontline. In an Oxfam survey of 222 WROs worldwide, respondents noted a “growing demand on their organizations and staff with less resources, with 27% noting staff mental health issues and burnout and 35% noting child/family care responsibilities” (Zaaroura and Fox 2021, 8).

In addition to contextual factors, WROs have faced and continue to face other challenges. Using the LHL principles conceived by Oxfam America, this section will focus on challenges related to partnerships, capacity sharing, funding, public engagement, and influencing experienced by WROs overall. It may seem that these challenges are not specific to WROs and can be shared by local and national actors in general. This report makes the case that these challenges are even more acute for WROs because they are working on issues that are often sidelined in humanitarian response: gender justice and women’s rights issues.

PARTNERSHIPS

This section focuses on relationships between local and national WROs and international actors, such as UN agencies and INGOs. Equitable and principled partnerships constitute one of the key pillars in the Grand Bargain (Grand Bargain 2021, 2). Such partners are to be supported by high-quality funding, a shared understanding of risk management, and partnership strategies that rely on local leadership. There was a perception that the COVID-19 pandemic would push the humanitarian sector to support local leadership more concretely, considering that many members of the international humanitarian sector were unable to travel. The Overseas Development Institute's (ODI) Humanitarian Policy Group used a mapping tool to show some of the shifts occurring during the pandemic; this work signaled that local actors were playing a greater role, such as leading emergency action and engaging with communities, and highlighted the importance of local networks and partnerships for better responding to the emergency (Spencer 2021).

Yet research by the Humanitarian Policy Group also found that moving to a more local system is hampered by "the inability of large organizations to shift to partnership approaches in the midst of the crisis, coupled with funding trends that consolidate rather than shift existing power structures" (Barbelet et al. 2020, 1). Internal dynamics can be hard to transcend, even during unprecedented events like a pandemic, and overcoming deep-rooted unequal power dynamics between international and local actors poses a significant challenge. A series of research reports by the Feminist Humanitarian Network (2020) on WROs' experiences during COVID-19 found that international actors' engagement with local actors needed to go beyond an implementing partner model to a meaningful partnership model. By meaningful partnership model, the FHN recommends a shift of power to WROs around decision-making in addition to funding (FHN 2021, 26). Similarly, ODI recommends tackling power imbalances through a principle-based approach modeled on the Global Humanitarian Platform's Principles of Partnership, to which Oxfam is a signatory (ICVA n.d.).¹³

In addition, a report by a group of local and international actors noted that partnerships should "focus on national and local contextual needs rather than international and donor priorities" (ABADD et al 2021, 31). Being aware of contextual needs requires time to build trust and knowledge with WROs and the communities in which they work, and it requires going beyond the subcontracting and remote programming preferred by many international actors (Barbelet et al. 2020, 7). A report by ODI highlights Oxfam's work with local actors as an example of good practice that combines good partnership principles and LHL (Barbelet et al. 2020, 9).

CAPACITY SHARING

In the literature, capacity support is often termed "capacity building," "capacity strengthening," or "capacity sharing." This report uses "capacity sharing," which is the language specified in the LHL Principles. The choice to use "sharing" instead of "building" was intentional, as "capacity" is usually defined as "lacking" and needing to be "built." As noted by Peace Direct, "The notion that local organizations and communities 'lack capacity' surfaced throughout the consultation [...] as one of the most overt examples of structural racism in the sector" (Peace Direct 2021, 26). Instead, "the terms 'capacity strengthening' or 'capacity exchange' or 'capacity sharing' acknowledge existing skills and assets that can be supported and shared" (Grand Bargain 2020, 1). It is worth asking whether "capacity strengthening" leads to different relationships and activities or is merely a semantic change from "capacity building." "Capacity sharing," however, has a distinct difference in that it sees the process as a two-way street, not unidirectional. Capacity sharing could, therefore, involve a mutual exchange of knowledge between and among different actors, whether local or international. Nonetheless, "capacity-building" activities remains more prevalent, showing that discursive shifts have yet to be matched with shifts in implementation efforts. Preexisting pathways of thinking about capacity seem hard to transform, as they are underpinned by unequal power dynamics and colonialist structures.

The literature said little about what specific technical trainings WROs desired as part of capacity building, sharing, or strengthening. The emphasis was on the *provision* of capacity trainings, not on what form capacity should take, which topics should be focused on, and who should make that decision. Based on the limited information that did exist, the main capacity needs expressed by WROs related to funding—but not just any funding. WROs sought flexible, multiyear funds that included overhead costs, as well as the ability to shape the purpose of their own funds. With such funds, WROs would have greater capacity to respond to shocks like the pandemic, retain staff, and do the programming they wish. More information on the funding question can be found in the following section.

FUNDING

Historically, WROs have tended to be underfunded. A brief from AWID (Dolker 2021) found that WROs receive only 0.13% of total official development assistance (ODA) and 0.4% of all gender-related aid. The pandemic exacerbated that problem: WROs noted challenges in accessing funds, highlighting the “multi-layered and opaque international system that cascades small portions of funding from international actors to WROs on time-bound projects without investing in their growth, leadership, or sustainability” (Hersh 2021, 9). While there may have been an assumption that the pandemic would lead to *more* financial support of local organizations, like WROs, because international actors would be unable to travel, this did not always pan out. In some cases, a shift in responsibilities did occur but was not necessarily accompanied by the requisite funds (Brubaker et al. 2021, 11). In addition, WROs, particularly small organizations, find it difficult to even apply for funding owing to complex and stringent donor requirements and expectations related to proposal writing, technical and financial systems, and experience managing large grants (Hersh 2021, 17). The challenging funding environment faced by WROs should also be considered in the wider landscape of direct funding to local and national actors. According to the *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report*, direct funding to local and national actors, never high to begin with, fell from 3 percent to 2020 to 1.2 percent in 2021 as a proportion of total humanitarian assistance (Development Initiatives 2022b, 88). The share of these funds going to WROs is unavailable.

The type of funding is also an issue. When WROs do receive funding, it often consists of short-term, project-specific funds that do not strengthen an organization’s ability to be sustainable and withstand crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (ActionAid 2021, 10). In the survey of WROs by Oxfam, 60 percent of respondents cited a lack of funding to maintain operations during the pandemic, and 25 percent reported diverting their own resources and facilities to fill in funding gaps to pay for staff and rent (Zaaroura and Fox 2021, 7). With project-specific funding, WROs often lack the ability to influence what the project is for, “relegating WROs to the role of ‘implementing partner,’ often to the detriment of the women in the communities with whom they work” (FHN 2021, 2).

It is important to parse out the degree of partnerships with WROs. International actors may gauge their support of WROs as adequate without delving into whether the WROs are implementing partners or something more. For instance, in an evaluation report by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group, the report described as “good practice” for localization and women’s groups the fact that “women’s national NGOs were intentionally recruited to be *implementing partners* to carry out response activities in the camps and communities” in Bangladesh and Colombia (Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation 2021, 21, emphasis added). Yet it was not specified whether these implementing partners were able to shape the projects they were working on. In some cases, WROs were reportedly able to repurpose their funds to respond to COVID-19, depending on the flexibility of donors, but such funds did not cover all the expenses incurred by WROs (FHN 2021, 25).

WROs reported losing funds as donors shifted their funding priorities toward pandemic response, which did not include the issues that WROs work on and did not treat WROs’ humanitarian work as essential (Aghajanian and Page 2020, 5; Tewa et al. 2021, 6). This diversion of funds has had real

and long-lasting consequences on women's lives; research noted that the reduction of funds for WROs has "crippled the women's rights movement in South Sudan" (WIPC et al. 2021, 18).

A report by the International Rescue Committee found that funds to respond to COVID-19 did not include support for services to address gender-based violence (GBV). Such funds made up only 0.48% of the overall funding appeal of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan, despite recognition that there was an increase in GBV globally due to the pandemic and movement restrictions (IRC 2020, 1). A report by the Pastoralist Girls Initiative and the Feminist Humanitarian Network shared the experiences of WROs in Kenya that reported losing funding for their strategic gender activities. The Refugee Consortium of Kenya lost funding for its legal and protection work and pivoted to focus on socioeconomic resilience during the pandemic, though still working to provide services (Pastoralist Girls Initiative and FHN 2020, 7). Furthermore, a reduction in funds that were miniscule to begin with could lead to increased competition among WROs, creating risks to the relationships essential to build feminist and women's rights movements within countries and regions, as well as depriving women and girls of much-needed services.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The LHL principle on public engagement involves ensuring that international actors connect local actors directly with donors and specifically mention and/or publicly acknowledge WROs in any communications, funding proposals, research reports, and more. Visibility not only brings attention to the important work led by WROs but can also lead to increased opportunities for partnership, funding, and opening of spaces of power (such as presenting in conferences or getting invited to sit in international meetings). The FHN, for example, commissioned research reports to document the experiences of WROs in the COVID-19 response in eight countries (Bangladesh, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria, Palestine, and South Africa). The reports were led and written by WROs in each of the countries.

In the literature, WROs did not report that publicly acknowledgment is a major priority in terms of their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding does not mean that such acknowledgment is not important or that it should not be done. It likely means is that WROs are battling other challenges, such as lack of funding and access to decision-making spaces, that demand the bulk of their focus. But we should also acknowledge the power of naming and honoring the important work being done by local WROs, as well as other local actors. As this work takes time and resources, international actors can play a key role in filling this gap, ideally by supporting WROs' efforts to document and share their stories themselves. International actors can also ensure that the contributions of WROs are available in multiple languages.

INFLUENCING

The influencing LHL principle refers to the ability of local actors, in this case WROs, to influence decision-making in the humanitarian sector. Note that participation is necessary but not sufficient for influencing. Being in decision-making spaces may be helpful to one's ability to influence those with decision-making authority, but it is not a given. However, evidence has shown that WROs remain excluded or minimally included in decision-making spaces, with a few exceptions. A report by CARE on its rapid gender analyses finds "that women are consistently left out of response decision making at local and community levels and that the crisis is only raising barriers to their participation" (Fuhrman and Rhodes 2020, 4). A survey by VOICE shared that "the principal underlying concern reported by women in all sub-regions is insufficient engagement of women's organizations in national COVID-19 response planning" (VOICE 2021, 3). Research on eight countries by the FHN (2020, 2) found that

WROs were also largely excluded from formal decision-making spaces in COVID-19, and their contributions to decision-making bodies ignored. WROs have in some contexts been excluded on punitive grounds or sidelined due to prevalent patriarchal attitudes held by male-dominated organizations or bodies.

Efforts by WROs to influence decisions and policymaking have sometimes led to opposition, such as in South Sudan, where attempts by women’s rights activists to raise awareness of gender-based violence faced pushback by legislators (WIPC et al. 2021, 18).

Other research finds the situation facing WROs to be more mixed. A report by Aghajanian and Page (2020) found “moderate evidence” that women’s organizations are included in decision-making. In a Monash University survey of WROs and advocates based in the Indo-Pacific region, more than half of respondents reported being involved in local task forces for COVID-19. The same survey noted that most respondents—88 percent—did not receive funding (or additional funding) to support their COVID-19 response efforts, supporting the point made earlier that funding for WROs remains critical (Monash University 2020, 5).

A report by Badabon Sangho and the Feminist Humanitarian Network found that respondents in 2 focus group discussions and 14 key informant interviews had mixed feelings about their ability to participate in decision-making spaces, specifically those led by the government. National WROs in Bangladesh shared that they had been given responsibilities with the National Disaster Management Council, and others mentioned that they are members of different humanitarian response committees (Badabon Sangho and FHN 2020, 3). The fact that they are included in these spaces, however, does not mean their voices are considered when decisions are being made.

In terms of influencing INGOs, reports have found that WROs are often treated as the “delivery arm” of larger NGOs or INGOs (UN Women and UNFPA 2020, 11). WROs have shared that they are often not involved in designing projects or conceptualizing project delivery. Thus it is important to assess whether international actors’ support of WROs is a true partnership or a superficial arrangement; while funding is important, it is crucial that funding be disbursed in ways that allow for the expertise of WROs to flourish.

CONCLUSION

WROs have been responding to humanitarian emergencies, and the COVID-19 global pandemic is no different. If anything, WROs—like other local and national actors—are stepping in to fill the gaps in responses left by governments and the international community. WROs are providing basic needs such as food and water, ensuring that pandemic response plans include gender concerns such as violence against women, helping women access services and come together virtually, and raising awareness within communities on how to protect against the virus.

Yet WROs are facing challenges on multiple fronts. Their work continues to go unfunded (or underfunded) and unrecognized, by both governments and international actors, a gap that renders them even more vulnerable in light of a shrinking civic space and the backlash against women’s rights. Accessing decision-making spaces to influence COVID-19 response plans also remains a struggle for WROs across the globe. Overall, the patriarchal structures of power within the humanitarian system continue to place undue pressure on WROs and serve as barriers to their participation. Such structures may be most obviously manifested in requirements for organizations to be formally registered, complex funding proposals, and expectations of humanitarian technical knowledge at the expense of gender justice and women’s rights, or they may be more subtle in terms of who gets invited into spaces of power.

This review has found that as WROs confronted the COVID-19 pandemic, the status quo was upheld. Emergencies such as a global pandemic may create opportunities to shake up systems and usher in new ways of working, but not without consistent follow-through. International actors’ efforts, when it comes to engaging with WROs in the COVID-19 humanitarian response, have been slow to change.

3. EVALUATIVE ANALYSIS: WROS AT THE CORE

This section provides an overview of the case studies from Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya (published separately). Written by three different entities—feminist researchers in Colombia, a women’s rights organization in Iraq, and a research institute in Kenya—the case studies give a detailed look at the experiences of WROs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response, with a deeper exploration of the stories of Oxfam’s WRO partners. This overview discusses Oxfam’s overall relationship with WROs in humanitarian contexts, sketches the context surrounding WROs in each of the countries, and identifies what Oxfam has done well and what challenges remain for the organization. The case studies themselves include more extensive analysis of the country contexts and offer a deeper understanding of the country-specific opportunities and challenges related to WROs’ responses to the pandemic.

An important caveat needs to be mentioned. The issues Oxfam needs to improve upon should not be seen as specific to each country office or affiliate. Oxfam Colombia, Oxfam Iraq, and Oxfam in Kenya all exist within a larger structure—the Oxfam Confederation—which both supports and limits what they can do. In addition, some of the changes needed to better support WROs in the humanitarian sector cannot be achieved by Oxfam or any one organization alone—joint efforts across international, national, and local organizations are required. Therefore, though the findings below were gathered from the rich case studies developed by the research partner, efforts to think through how Oxfam can better support WROs must be part of a larger conversation within the Oxfam Confederation, as well as within the humanitarian sector writ large.

OXFAM: WROS AND LHL

Oxfam has made a commitment to integrate feminist principles into its work.¹⁴ These feminist principles (see Box 2) are meant to serve as a framework to guide all the work Oxfam does, both internally and externally. According to Oxfam International’s 10-year strategic plan, Oxfam considers itself to be feminist, “recogni[zing] that there is no economic, social, and environmental justice without gender justice. Feminist principles guide all our action and interaction” (Oxfam International 2020, 11). The same strategic plan includes an ambition to draw on local expertise and women’s leadership and enhance collaboration with women’s rights and feminist organizations and movements (14). Oxfam America, whose LHL principles are the focus of this report, shows a similar commitment to feminist principles and supporting WROs. In Oxfam America’s 2020–2030 strategic plan, the organization commits to advocating for gender justice and LHL and “foster[ing] strong and authentic partnerships with organizations fighting on the frontlines for . . . gender justice” (Oxfam America 2020a, 8).

Box 2: Oxfam’s Feminist Principles

- I share power.
- I challenge my behavior.
- I support the feminist movement.
- Nothing about us without us.
- Feminism is for everyone.
- There is no justice without gender justice.
- I champion diversity.
- I value safety.

- I want a supportive environment.
- I believe in freedom of expression.
- Eliminate gender-based violence.

Source: Feminist Principles. Oxfam.

As mentioned earlier, Oxfam is also a signatory to the Charter for Change, the Grand Bargain, and the Pledge for Change, all of which support LHL. However, none of these frameworks have specific language concerning commitments to WROs, though the Charter for Change has been endorsed by WROs such as the African Women and Youth Action for Development of Uganda and STEWARDWOMEN of South Sudan. Research by ActionAid found that the Grand Bargain remains gender exclusionary, though almost all signatories, including Oxfam, commit to integrate gender equality into their work on an individual level (Hersh et al. 2021, 4).¹⁵ The Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report identified Oxfam as one of only five organizations that reported on funding to local WROs and women-led organizations (Metcalf-Hough et al 2022, 62). In Oxfam’s most recent self-report to the Grand Bargain, the organization discusses its work to improve the quality of its partnerships with WROs, “supporting them as allies by creating partnerships that go beyond funding and influencing donor support, flexible funding and increasing their participation in decision making processes in the sector” (Oxfam International 2022b, 4). Lastly, Oxfam is committed to the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, which involves supporting women leaders and local women’s organizations.¹⁶

COUNTRY CONTEXTS

COLOMBIA

Colombia has a rich history of feminist organizing. WROs have been involved in humanitarian responses ranging from involvement in peace and security discussions due to the country’s long-running internal conflict between the government and guerrilla groups, support for Venezuelan refugees fleeing multiple crises in their home country, or actions to tackle the spike in gender-based violence aggravated by the pandemic (GNWP 2021a, 2). The context in which Colombian WROs—particularly in rural areas—operate is riddled with insecurities exacerbated by the pandemic. In the wake of quarantines, the Colombia government, as well as national and international humanitarian organizations, left rural areas, decreasing rural communities’ access to social services, and allowing armed groups to expand their control (Zulver 2020, 23). While WROs have stepped into to help alleviate the lack of services all over the country, it can come at a cost for women leaders. One unfortunate example is Carlota Isabel Salinas Pérez, a member of Organización Femenina Popular, who was murdered by a group of armed men while she was collecting funds to help meet the humanitarian needs of her community (Zulver 2020, 25; HRD Memorial 2023).

A report by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls observed that “[international] humanitarian agencies in Colombia have long established a working relationship with Colombian women’s organizations for the humanitarian response to displacement” (Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation 2020, 7). Some examples from the report focus on women’s organizations working with Venezuelan refugees who are survivors of GBV, as well as the creation of a Trans Woman Collective.

Women’s rights are at the core of Oxfam Colombia’s work, which focuses on gender justice and human rights by supporting grassroots organizations (Oxfam n.d., “Colombia”).¹⁷ Oxfam Colombia works with more than 23 WROs at the national level, and the humanitarian team within Oxfam Colombia works with four WRO partners. In its COVID-19 response, Oxfam Colombia partnered with three WROs to work on the Venezuelan refugee crisis. All three were interviewed for the case study.

IRAQ

Research by Women Empowerment Organization (WEO), a WRO based in Iraq, emphasized the challenging environment for women's organizations and WROs in that country. In order to survive, women's organizations and WROs had to make difficult choices, such as moving to increasing awareness about COVID-19 instead of working on gender justice. Women's organizations and WROs found it hard to unite their gender perspective with their efforts to meet the immediate needs created by the pandemic, particularly because they lacked funding support, or their work was stalled by quarantine measures. For instance, women's organizations providing legal aid services for women could not continue their work owing to the closure of court institutions in the country (WEO 2023, 9).

However, some women's organizations fought to continue their gender work during the pandemic. Hawa Organization for Relief and Development, a women's organization based in the Diyala Governorate, Muqdadiya District, provided psychosocial support and legal and health aid to women through its listening and counseling centers and made sure to share the major challenges women were experiencing with policymakers. Hawa also conducted needs assessments and questionnaires for international actors, even though it reported not receiving any funding for relief activities. Bent Al-Rafedain, a women's organization focusing on gender equality and gender-based violence, used its advocacy experience to lobby the Babylon Provincial Council for a woman doctor to be included in the crisis response (WEO 2023, 7).

Oxfam in Iraq works to build resilience in conflict-affected areas of the country, where its humanitarian assistance focuses on interventions in water, sanitation, and hygiene, emergency food security, vulnerable livelihoods, and rehabilitation of basic services (Oxfam n.d., "Iraq"). Oxfam in Iraq currently has 20 partners that identify as either women's organizations or WROs. The research interviewed 20 women's organizations/WROs, five of whom are Oxfam partners. Oxfam provided no funding to WROs specifically to respond to the pandemic.

KENYA

WROs in Kenya are quite active in the humanitarian sector. A report by the Global Network for Women Peacebuilders shared that "local Kenyan women's rights organizations [WROs] representing grassroots and rural women and girls have called for concrete gender-sensitive measures to COVID-19 that puts women at the heart of the pandemic response and recovery" such as medical treatment for GBV survivors, increase in cash transfers, and increased gender-disaggregated data (GNWP 2021b, 3). Seven WROs wrote an advisory note directed to the Kenyan government calling for timely and adequate resources for GBV response within the country, including safe housing, medical care, online counseling, and legal aid (CREAW 2020).

In their interviews with the Pastoralist Girls Initiative and the Feminist Humanitarian Network, WROs reported that they had key roles in battling the pandemic, such as "supporting coordination meetings and monitoring visits for the County COVID-10 committees at county, sub-county and ward levels, *nyumba kumi*¹⁸ initiatives and local administration" (Pastoralist Girls Initiative and FHN 2020, 10). The case study by Development Initiatives for this evaluative research project describes other activities conducted by WROs, such as joining COVID-19 emergency response committees, at both county and national levels, training decision-makers on gender-sensitive planning, and advocating for a government-led safehouse for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (Owino 2023, 10 – 11). The authors of the case study also note that all WROs consulted for this study were part of networks or alliances that informed humanitarian responses, such as the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Committee or the Network for Survivors of SGBV (Owino 2023, 10).

Oxfam in Kenya has five WRO partners: Association of Women in Agriculture, Badili Africa, Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), Dhobi Women Network, and Wangu Kanja Foundation (WKF). For their pandemic response, Oxfam in Kenya partnered with CREAW and WKF and focused

responses in two urban settings: Nairobi and Mombasa. Areas of activity included sexual and gender-based violence; water, sanitation, and hygiene; and social protection.

As part of this evaluative research, the case study by Development Initiatives (2022) noted that it was the partnership with CREAM and WKF that allowed Oxfam in Kenya to have impact in informal urban settlements, as Oxfam in Kenya did not have experience in working in such contexts. The case study noted that “partnering with local WROs that were already working in the informal settlements provided an opportunity for Oxfam to learn from its local partners the dynamics of delivering aid in such locations” (Owino 2023, 18).

PARTNERSHIPS

The partnership principle for LHL focuses on ensuring that relationships between Oxfam and local actors are equitable, with local actors involved in all stages of a project and with all involved actors—whether local, national, or international—able to use feedback and learning mechanisms about partnerships. This section will focus on WROs’ experiences partnering with Oxfam, with a specific focus on equitable and strategic partnerships, the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, what worked for the WROs, and what Oxfam could do better.

EQUITABLE AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

According to a learning compendium by Oxfam on LHL, Oxfam is working to “embrace an equitable partnering culture and avoid taking a subcontracting approach,” in line with the recommendations from the literature on how to best integrate local leadership in humanitarian work (Kergoat et al. 2020, 6). Aspects of this equitable partnering culture involve continuous and open dialogue, reflective practice, and, on Oxfam’s side, “letting go a position of control” and flexibly adapting to changing contexts (15). In an Oxfam toolkit on strengthening LHL in La Guajira, Colombia, a WRO partner (interviewed for the Colombia case study as well)—Fundación Mujer y Futuro—shared that good contextual understanding and awareness of power dynamics served as a crucial foundation for a strong partnership (Ipuana Epiyeu and Pinzón Moreno 2021, 35). A research report that examines Oxfam in the Philippines’ LHL approach by focusing on power relations between them and their local partners recommends strategic partnerships. Strategic partnerships involve building trust, moving away from project-specific funds toward long-term ones, and actively engaging with smaller organizations as well (Vera and Brusola-Vera 2021, 34).

HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT-PEACE NEXUS

A report by Vera and Brusola-Vera for Oxfam had another crucial recommendation for international actors: partner with and work within the humanitarian-development nexus.¹⁹ This was strongly echoed in the interviews with WROs conducted for the case studies. The researchers found that local actors work primarily within the nexus and that “they would even consider humanitarian responses that are undertaken without any reference to existing development programs in the community as potentially undermining long-term strategies” (Vera and Brusola-Vera 2021, 16). The report makes the critical point that the time-bound approach adopted by humanitarian work should adopt a long-term development focus of local organizations instead. Ultimately, the distinction between humanitarian and development (and peace) reflects how the sectors, dominated by international actors, have organized their efforts; it does not reflect the lived realities of those on the ground. In 2019, to further thinking on the nexus both internally and externally, Oxfam developed a discussion paper on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, which calls for the “rethinking [of] finance mechanisms, ways of working, the expertise needed and reflection on how we set standards and define success” (Fanning and Fullwood-Thomas 2019, 4). Oxfam has also discussed the need for a One Oxfam approach that “weave[s] together development and humanitarian programs to help communities simultaneously reduce their vulnerability to poverty and disaster” (Kergoat et al. 2020, 5).

The humanitarian-development-peace nexus has resonance for WROs, as they are often seen as development or non-humanitarian actors, and this characterization is often viewed as a negative or a weakness. By adopting a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach, Oxfam could potentially strengthen and expand relationships with WROs. In a report on Oxfam funding for emergency response, local actors who were interviewed suggested that Oxfam should look at humanitarian actions within a development lens, which could “provide a more inclusive environment for [WROs] or gender interest organizations, whose work is often deeply rooted in development issues” (Manlutac 2021, 8). This approach would require a shift in how Oxfam engages with communities—moving from a focus on a specific, time-bound event, with a surge component, to a long-term focus aimed at tackling the roots of inequality by building relationships and trust.

This stance on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus is not shared across the Oxfam Confederation. A report by Oxfam in Burkina Faso stated that “[WROs] choose to restrict themselves to the development work they already know, and do not yet see enough opportunity for them to fully integrate humanitarian actions into their operations,” a characterization that separates work on issues like women’s leadership from humanitarian response (de Biolley 2021, 4). A report by Oxfam Novib had a similar assessment, finding that both WROs and women-led organizations “are not multisectoral and their coverage is very limited” (Oxfam Novib 2021, 31). This tension has not been resolved.

PARTNERSHIPS: WHAT WORKED

WRO partners in the three countries acknowledged Oxfam’s effort to form equitable partnerships, highlighting *mutual* learning, autonomy, trust, and open communication as key aspects. In Colombia, WROs shared that they see mutual recognition of knowledge and expertise held by them and Oxfam Colombia, in what was described as a “horizontal, non-hierarchical relationship.” Partnerships between Oxfam Colombia and WROs are also built on a shared commitment to women’s rights, which they incorporate into their humanitarian actions. There is a sense that Oxfam Colombia is eager for joint learning, which is helpful in fostering a more equitable relationship with its WRO partners, allowing for a balance of autonomy with support. Trust and open communication were repeatedly mentioned as integral parts of the partnership in the Colombia case study (see Box 3), which the head of Oxfam Colombia portrayed as intentional: “there is mutual recognition, there is trust, and there is a solid relationship that allows us to talk about things frankly” (Jaramillo and Uribe 2023, 9). In Iraq, several WRO partners shared that they found the partnership with Oxfam in Iraq to be egalitarian and transparent. Mutual support helps support their partnerships, and local partners help deepen Oxfam’s work. The case study by WEO noted that Oxfam relies on its local partners to understand the Iraqi context and to help identify needs.

In Kenya, WROs experienced open communication and regular feedback sessions with Oxfam in Kenya and appreciated that they had access to multiple teams within Oxfam rather than just one point person. Mutual advantage was highlighted in Kenya as well. Through its partners, Oxfam was able to gain access to inner urban areas, where it does not normally operate, while partners gained access to funding and other forms of support.

Box 3. Trust: Essential Prerequisite for Partnerships

The case studies emphasize trust as a key factor in the success of partnerships. Yet despite its importance, the concept of trust can be nebulous. This box captures some of the key elements of trust and pulls out the practical recommendations shared by partners from the case studies.

While trust has been mentioned in the literature on LHL, more work needs to be done to unravel the characteristics necessary to promote trust in partnerships. The literature on health and community-based partnerships says trust involves the following dimensions: (1) openness and sharing; (2) support and acceptance; (3) reciprocity; and (4) vulnerability (Jones and Barry 2016, 17). According to this research, fostering trust involves being clear on the

purpose of the partnership and explicitly defining roles. The contributions of all partners must be acknowledged and valued. All parties must feel free to be vulnerable with one another to encourage the sharing of information, particularly regarding challenges.

In the case studies, partners stated that trust can be encouraged through the following tangible activities:

- Move away from project-specific funds toward long-term ones, as building trust takes time and repeated interactions.
- Create mechanisms for frequent (as desired by the partners) and open communication between Oxfam staff and partners.
- Integrate flexibility that allows partners to shape the projects they are working on to create a partnership rather than a donor-grantee relationship.
- Oxfam should be willing to take risks and use its brand to support and protect WROs (and other local actors) in the humanitarian-development-peace sectors.
- Create space for “failure” and truth-telling between partners.

Obstacles to building trust “include partner stereotypes, different languages, values and cultures, the history of relationships, and power imbalances” (Sloan and Oliver 2013, 1836). This was evident from the Iraq case study, which highlighted the damage that mistrust by international organizations such as Oxfam can cause to a partnership. Examples of how mistrust can create transactional versus equitable partnerships included micromanagement of projects and surprise visits to local organizations. This mistrust can be based on international actors’ fiduciary or fraud concerns toward local partners but is nonetheless rooted in unequal paternalistic and colonialist power dynamics, where international actors afford the grace of trust to each other but not to their local partners. Another recommendation to instill trust was to have consistency in Oxfam staff or to ensure that institutional knowledge around partnerships was clearly shared during staff transitions.

Research on trust in partnerships noted that interpersonal relationships play an important role in creating successful collaborations: “Interpersonal trust can lay the foundation for the development of interorganizational trust” (Sloan and Oliver 2013, 1861). In addition, ensuring that Oxfam staff have the requisite contextual knowledge and language skills to foster strong relationships with WROs and local organizations was another recommendation that can help alleviate the obstacles created around cultural clash. Ultimately it is important to understand that trust is not automatically built into partnerships. To flourish, it requires trainings and explicit attention. It also requires an explicit recognition of power and specific efforts to share power within partnerships (Jones and Barry 2016, 20).

PARTNERSHIPS: WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN

While WROs appreciated Oxfam’s attempts to be open, transparent, and collaborative, Oxfam can make still more progress in these areas, as well as in providing support during Oxfam’s internal staff transitions, moving to long-term strategic partnerships, and working within the nexus. In Colombia, the WROs interviewed share that partnerships would be more fruitful with deeper exchanges of knowledge and more interaction beyond the identification and formulation of proposals. WRO partners also argue that they have more to share beyond a knowledge of the local context (Jaramillo and Uribe 2023). Partnerships must be based on a shared understanding of what values each partner adds and how the partners will be mutually supportive (and potentially transformed) in the collaboration.

In Iraq, partners highlighted several challenges. Frequent staff transitions within Oxfam can lead to some loss of the institutional knowledge. While Oxfam has made many efforts to help preserve institutional memory and ensure a suitable impact of the implemented project, partners said that more could be done. Interviewed organizations also believed that more transparency around

Oxfam’s internal processes, including more feedback on declined proposals to allow for learning, would help improve partnerships.

Oxfam partners in Kenya said they would appreciate a shift from project-specific partnerships to long-term strategic partnerships. Also in Kenya, WROs noted that “increased consultations did not always lead to influence” (Owino 2023, 13). Partners recommended that Oxfam rethink how to have discussions with WROs—for instance, “play[ing] a lesser role in the co-creation by initiating discussions with WROs around what they wanted to implement, based on their understanding of needs, rather than suggesting a specific intervention [...]in the first instance” (Owino 2023, 12). Such feedback means that Oxfam needs to rethink what constitutes “open” conversation. It needs to tie conversations to clear and obvious moments of uptake or reciprocal accountability to prove that it is listening to its partners.

Lastly, in all countries WROs existed comfortably within the humanitarian-development-peace context, but Oxfam less so, signaling a partnership gap, or even a capacity gap, for Oxfam. In Colombia, the local WRO partners saw themselves as human rights actors first and foremost and not as humanitarian organizations. They have relationships with both humanitarian and development actors. In fact, one of the organizations in Colombia, Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu (FMW), insisted that it did not want to be considered a humanitarian organization, as that would damage its reputation in the communities with whom it works, where “the community is no longer seeing us as the defenders of their human rights, but instead as an organization that digs wells and gives out hygiene kits” (Jaramillo and Uribe 2023, 13). One recommendation from the Colombia case study is better coordination among the humanitarian and development teams within Oxfam, which would improve partnerships with organizations such as FMW, which sees itself as a “partner in development programs and as an ally in the humanitarian program” (Jaramillo and Uribe 2023, 14). This advice is applicable to Oxfam teams in Iraq and Kenya as well. In Iraq, the case study authors found that many of the women’s organizations involved in the research project work across multiple sectors: humanitarian response, development, and human rights. WROs involved in the research in Kenya, in contrast to Colombia, saw themselves as humanitarian actors, but some of the organizations’ focus on GBV involved legal aid and health, which also transcends the humanitarian-development-peace divide.

CAPACITY SHARING

The capacity-sharing principle refers to prioritizing the capacity development needs of local actors as specified by local actors themselves and ensuring that Oxfam does not hamper local organizations’ capacity by recruiting local and national staff during emergencies. This section addresses conceptual issues related to capacity sharing before discussing what worked between Oxfam and WROs in regard to capacity sharing and what did not. It seeks to understand how Oxfam responded to local WROs’ capacity-sharing needs during the COVID-19 response and to understand whether Oxfam was able to integrate a capacity-sharing perspective into its partnerships with WROs or whether the more problem-oriented capacity-building perspective prevailed.

In Oxfam publications on LHL, discussions of WROs’ capacity needs have tended to focus on capacity building to bridge perceived technical gaps. For instance, in an Oxfam report on funding local actors through emergency response funds, respondents shared that Oxfam often disqualifies WROs for funding because WROs are perceived to lack humanitarian capacity. An Oxfam respondent stated that “the responsibility falls on Oxfam to find a WRO and provide some technical capacity building on humanitarianism” (Manlutac 2021, 32). Some preconceptions exist amongst Oxfam staff and might need to be deconstructed to allow for possible modalities of sharing, development of institutional and/or individual capacities, and recognition of complementarity in relationships between different actors holding diverse capacities.

Another perceived capacity gap of WROs is that they are seen to work primarily on development issues rather than humanitarian ones. A report by Oxfam on a project called “Empowering Local and

National Humanitarian Actors” observed that “WLOs and WROs often lack humanitarian expertise, mandate and operational capacities for rapid deployment” (Oxfam Novib 2021, 31). In the context of humanitarian action, WROs are therefore seen primarily as *lacking* capacity, making it unlikely that capacity sharing and a mutual exchange of knowledge will occur.

CAPACITY SHARING: WHAT WORKED

Across the case studies, several terms are used to describe capacity work with partners. In Colombia, the case study describes some capacity activities as *knowledge-sharing*, which reflects the efforts of Oxfam Colombia and its partners to maintain a horizontal relationship and to be intentional about mutual learning and constant dialogue. The case study also references Oxfam Colombia’s *capacity-building* activities involving information on the humanitarian system, digital tools, and advocacy and influencing efforts. Partners flagged these as useful to allow for their effective leadership.

The Iraq case study refers to *capacity-building* trainings for local partners. Partners reported benefiting from Oxfam’s capacity-building support, which included help with getting information about grants from international actors, developing financial systems, writing reports, working with donors, and campaigning to ensure that funds from donors go directly to local organizations and not through an international intermediary.

In Kenya, partners noted that Oxfam in Kenya’s dedicated budget for *capacity-strengthening* activities was helpful and that Oxfam identified capacity-strengthening needs during organizational capacity assessments. Examples of capacity strengthening included training in safeguarding and fundraising, and help with creating organizational policies. The case study notes that *capacity sharing* was apparent in that Oxfam relied on local WROs to deliver aid to urban areas where Oxfam did not have prior connections.

CAPACITY SHARING: WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN

Overall, Oxfam needs to do more work on transitioning from a capacity-building model to a capacity-sharing one, though Oxfam Colombia’s knowledge-sharing model appears to embrace the spirit of mutual learning and sharing.

In Colombia, partners shared that they would appreciate partnerships with Oxfam Colombia to include opportunities for cross-collaboration with Oxfam’s other partners, recognizing that there could be fruitful knowledge sharing among partners and not just between the partner and Oxfam Colombia. Organizing spaces to allow for knowledge exchange among partners would be beneficial for the partners overall. In addition, partners in Colombia also noted that they would appreciate two-way sharing on topics outside of technical support, such as issues around reproductive health needs in humanitarian contexts. The process by which WROs can solicit capacity-sharing or knowledge-sharing topics needs to be better understood.

In Iraq, WROs interviewed for this research had several areas of feedback on Oxfam’s capacity-sharing principle. The first concerned the geographic areas in which Oxfam in Iraq offers capacity opportunities: they wish to see Oxfam working in other locations and move toward working more in southern Iraq. A second concern involves access to and transparency around the provision of such trainings. Oxfam in Iraq reported that it aims to work with as many civil society organizations as possible but that it is often limited by factors such as project requirements to work with specific partners, the need to target certain partners based on their capacity needs, and resource availability. Third, WROs in Iraq said that in addition to the content of capacity-building trainings, they valued capacity building as an opportunity to build stronger relationships with Oxfam as well as with other international actors.

The Kenyan case study authors, Development Initiatives, finds that “international partners are yet to transition from a ‘capacity building’ approach that focuses on identifying certain technical gaps

or deficits that need to be filled to a ‘capacity sharing’ approach that promotes collaborative and mutual learning” (Owino 2023, 19). Kenya WRO partners also note that the short-term nature of the partnerships with Oxfam make it hard to have effective and sustainable capacity-sharing support. WROs need to be more involved in defining what capacity-building or capacity-sharing activities are offered by Oxfam in Kenya. Oxfam, like other international actors, defines capacity activities based on organizational assessments rather than on a dialogue with partners on their needs. WROs recommended measuring and evaluating capacity activities to see if they are effective. Lastly, as in Colombia, partners in Kenya shared that peer learning and exchanges would be a form of capacity sharing that could help them grow.

FUNDING

While all the LHL principles are valid and important, it can be argued that funding is the most crucial for WROs as it relates directly to their survival and sustainability. Funding also connects concretely with the other principles. This section explores Oxfam’s funding of WROs for humanitarian action, discusses what has been successful in terms of Oxfam’s support for WROs, and identifies what remains to be improved.

As already noted, funding to WROs, such as through ODA, has historically been low, and these paltry numbers have been further reduced with the COVID-19 pandemic. Oxfam, as a Confederation, has yet to reach its Grand Bargain commitment of ensuring that 25% of its humanitarian funding goes directly to local and national partners. In 2020–2021, about 20% of its funding went to local actors. In addition, Oxfam saw a decrease in the proportion of this humanitarian funding going to women-led organizations or WROs, from 21% in 2019–2020 to 10% in 2020–2021 (Du Vent and Mooney – internal, 13). There could be several reasons for this shift. Oxfam may have prioritized other organizations over WROs to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This change is concerning and is at odds with the organization’s commitment to feminist principles and partnerships with WROs. This section will examine how Oxfam supported WROs during the pandemic in terms of funding—both funding from Oxfam and help with obtaining funds from other sources.

FUNDING: WHAT WORKED

WRO partners in all countries appreciated that Oxfam allowed them the flexibility to adjust budget lines and request additional funds. WROs interviewed in the Kenya research shared that their ability to “repurpose the programs and budgets they had before COVID-19 largely depended on the flexibility of their donors/INGO partners to allow for changes in programming and the demands of the affected communities” (Owino 2023, 5). Local WROs in Kenya also appreciated being able to work with Oxfam in Kenya to shift decision-making power to them, in terms of identifying what response activities to undertake (Owino 2023, 12).

Partners in Colombia reported struggling with how the funding system operates in general, which leaves the decision-making power outside of local organizations. They mentioned the need to diversify funding sources to ensure organizations’ sustainability. Most of the comments regarding funding in the Colombia case study focus on the larger funding environment in which they operate; specific comments on funding from Oxfam Colombia did not emerge in the case study.

Oxfam in Iraq provided funding for local women’s organizations to conduct gender work during the pandemic, which partners appreciated, considering that donor funds tended to shift toward pandemic response. Partners shared that they found Oxfam’s funding to be generous.

FUNDING: WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN

As mentioned, funding did not emerge as a point of discussion much in the Colombia case study, apart from the need for support with getting alternative sources of funding. However, in both Iraq and Kenya, partners provided similar critiques. In both countries, partners took issue with the short-term, project-based nature of funding that was made available to them. This may have been due to the humanitarian context and corresponding emergency funding streams and mechanisms, which are intended to support short-term projects and provide rapid injections of funds. Where possible, Oxfam aims to provide medium- to longer-term support to partners and affected communities by seeking longer-term, more sustainable funding based on multi-year grants or securing a follow-up phase or top-up, where feasible, to leverage project impact. However, this is dependent on the funding environment, donor appetite, and budget restrictions. Though funds to partners are often short term, Oxfam as a confederation is endeavoring to draw lessons from previous projects to inform future proposal development and project funding to ensure transformative change and to use their position to encourage donors to support longer-term timeframes. Considering the length of time required by gender work, women’s organizations find it difficult to maintain continuity, retain staff, and achieve their objectives with short funding cycles. An example in the case study by WEO in Iraq involves a legal aid project for survivors of violence against women. The courts’ bureaucratic procedures resulted in a lengthy timeframe, but Oxfam was unable to extend the timeline of the grant, mainly owing to limitations on the part of Oxfam’s back donor, with the result that the partner organization was unable to achieve the desired results of its project. Partners in both countries also criticized the low or nonexistent level of indirect cost recovery (ICR) provided, as it is difficult for organizations to be sustainable and grow without funds to cover administrative costs. ICR can allow local organizations to maintain a budget to improve organizational systems and capacity (Development Initiatives 2022c; Anwar 2022).

Lastly, feedback from the Iraq case study (but also relevant to other international actors) notes that Oxfam and other actors should advocate for more equitable access to funding opportunities based on criteria that is not solely determined by the size of an organization. Such efforts could help create a more equitable system for women’s organizations of all sizes, particularly those that are small and under resourced (WEO 2023, 5).

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The public engagement principle calls for Oxfam to make visible and acknowledge the role of local actors—specifically WROs, in the context of this report—and connect them directly with donors. Oxfam has been working to ensure that it recognizes the role of local actors in its communications, such as through joint branding on reports, and to clearly name organizations in press releases, press conferences, social media, donor reports, blog posts, and articles. Oxfam has created a [microsite](#) on LHL that includes Oxfam’s research, policies, and stories on the topic and prominently features Oxfam’s partners. Lastly, Oxfam is committed to brokering direct contact between local actors and donors in meetings, proposals, and other communication methods (Oxfam America 2020b).

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: WHAT WORKED

Colombia partners reported that Oxfam Colombia had a transparent process and close accompaniment with them in their engagement with donors and communication processes. Oxfam Colombia continues to facilitate spaces for partner organizations to directly interact with donors.

In Iraq, Oxfam has supported partners by offering training on how to interact with donors. Oxfam in Iraq has also mobilized a signature campaign calling for funds from donors to go directly to local organizations, which promotes their visibility. It organized a conference in Erbil to create a space for donors to directly interact with local organizations, including some women’s organizations.

The Kenya case study notes that Oxfam made sure to promote the work of its WRO partners in tangible ways, such as website development support, access to the media via briefings, and support for WROs' direct access to donors. For instance, a WRO partner used some of the Oxfam funding to work with media, such as the *Daily Nation*, to cover its work (Owino 2023, 21). Oxfam in Kenya also helped members of a consortium—including two of its local WRO partners—meet directly with the Danish ambassador in Mombasa. These opportunities to interact with potential donors allow WROs and other local partners to directly share the important work that they are doing.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN

In some contexts, WROs and women's organizations need more support to better interact with donors, as noted in all three case studies. For instance, though the conference in Erbil that brought together international donors and local partners was welcome, women's organizations interviewed for the research shared that the event was in English, and they wished Oxfam had provided more translators. In addition, respondents shared that the event prioritized larger organizations and lacked issue and geographic specificity.

Partners in Kenya are looking for more accountability around how INGOs in general—including Oxfam—pick and choose strategies to enhance the visibility of local partners, including joint branding (Owino 2023, 21). In addition, as in Iraq, interviewees in Kenya said that smaller WROs lacked access to visibility compared with larger national WROs. Smaller WROs, and not just the "blessed few," need more attention from international actors like Oxfam, and WROs in general need more direct access to donors (UN Women 2019, 2).

INFLUENCING

"Influencing" refers to advocacy work to ensure that local and national actors have access to decision-making and coordination forums. This section discusses what our partners' experiences have been in terms of Oxfam's support of their interaction in spaces of power.

INFLUENCING: WHAT WORKED

Accompaniment by Oxfam Colombia has helped boost the profile of its local WRO partners working in the border areas with Venezuela. While the partners who participate in humanitarian coordination bodies—like the GIFMM (El Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos, or the Interagency Group on Mixed Migratory Flows) or the ELC (Equipo Local de Coordinación, or Local Coordination Team)—come into those spaces with their own agendas, Oxfam Colombia has promoted dialogues between the government and partner organizations (Jaramillo and Uribe 2023, 12). Partners shared that they work collaboratively with Oxfam Colombia to ensure that the needs of women and other diverse populations in the border region are being heard in humanitarian spaces. Partners have used Oxfam Colombia's good standing in the humanitarian sector in the country to make themselves visible as political actors and to amplify the rights of women and other marginalized communities (Jaramillo and Uribe 2023, 12).

In Iraq, WEO researchers found that Oxfam-led advocacy efforts supported coordination between local and international actors and that Oxfam was instrumental in helping organizations participate in an LHL dialogue. One WRO shared that it found Oxfam's support crucial in enhancing its advocacy efforts, helping it move from a local to the national level to the point where it now sees itself as a leader in this space.

In Kenya, an Oxfam-supported consortium, which brings together two local WROs, a national humanitarian actor, and two INGOs, organized a high-level forum for government officials to discuss needs of women and girls such as action on SGBV. As in Colombia, Oxfam in Kenya was able to use its resources and network to convene important actors to interact with local WROs.

INFLUENCING: WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN

The case studies in all three countries had feedback on how to improve WROs’ access to decision-making spaces where they could do advocacy, but the comments were directed at the international humanitarian sector overall more than at Oxfam per se. Partners in Colombia spoke about how they find the humanitarian system to be patriarchal and colonialist; local organizations did not feel welcomed for their knowledge and connections and seen as equal partners. In Iraq, interviewees reiterated the need for support for small organizations and organizations from different geographic areas. The Kenyan case study spoke of the need to form networks among local WROs and international organizations to enhance impact. To bolster these efforts, funding from donors and international organizations like Oxfam is needed.

CONCLUSION

Table 7 brings together the main findings in terms of what Oxfam did well in supporting WROs during the COVID-19 pandemic response and the areas in which Oxfam can continue to improve.

Table 7. Evaluation of Oxfam’s Support: Centering the Experiences of WROs

Partnerships	
Partnerships between international actors and local actors are “as equal as possible” (i.e., collaborative decision-making, shared learning, and long-term partnerships).	<p>WHAT WORKED?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mutual accountability</i>: Relationships are based on mutual support and need, as well as reciprocal accountability. • <i>Trust and transparency</i>: Communication is open and regular.
	<p>WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN FOR OXFAM?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Learning exchange and learning loops</i>: A deeper exchange of learning between Oxfam and partners, as well as among partners, is needed. More feedback and learning loops are needed so partners can see what impact their partnership has on Oxfam’s decisions. • <i>Staff sustainability and capacity</i>: Frequent staff transitions at Oxfam imperil efforts to build trust and relationships with partners and communities. Improved staff knowledge of local context and language is needed. • <i>Long-term and flexible partnerships</i>: A shift from project-specific to more long-term, flexible partnerships is needed. • <i>Humanitarian-development-peace nexus</i>: Oxfam needs to rethink how to navigate the humanitarian-development-peace nexus internally to better reflect and support the work of WROs and local partners.
Capacity Sharing	
International actors prioritize the capacity development needs of local actors as specified by local actors themselves, and prevent the negative impact of recruiting local/national staff during emergencies.	<p>WHAT WORKED?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Specific trainings</i>: Helpful capacity-building activities include information on the humanitarian system and humanitarian principles, digital tool support, advocacy, safeguarding trainings, and support to help create organizational policies.
	<p>WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN FOR OXFAM?</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conceptual clarity:</i> The LHL sector recommends a shift from a focus on capacity <i>building</i> to capacity <i>sharing</i>. However, practice has not caught up to discourse, and Oxfam needs to think through the distinctions between building, strengthening, and sharing. • <i>“Fixing” WROs:</i> Oxfam should be careful not to think of WROs solely as organizations that need to be “fixed” via capacity building to become more humanitarian actors, for two reasons: (1) they bring in valuable expertise that should be recognized; and (2) not all WROs want to be humanitarians as they see it as odds with their strategic gender agenda and human rights lens. Shifting from a capacity-building to a sharing approach could help alter this thinking. • <i>Peer-to-peer learning:</i> More opportunities for Oxfam to create cross-learning opportunities among partners would be appreciated. • <i>Dialogue with WROs:</i> Oxfam could work more with WROs to identify what activities around capacity would be most useful to them. Partners have shared that Oxfam makes the decision based on Oxfam’s organizational assessments but would appreciate more of a dialogue on this issue.
Funding	
<p>International actors pass 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors, including overhead costs, and are transparent about such funds.</p>	<p>WHAT WORKED?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Flexibility:</i> WROs appreciated Oxfam’s flexibility to let them adjust budget lines and request more funds, as well as to decide where to focus response activities. • <i>Direct funds:</i> Oxfam’s direct funding of WROs was considered a strength. • <i>Gender work valued:</i> WRO partners valued Oxfam funding in a landscape that was dramatically shifting under their feet, as other donors took away funds to go toward other forms of COVID-19 response activities. <p>WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN FOR OXFAM?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More funds, more data:</i> Ensure that funding levels of WROs remain strong, and make sure that Oxfam continues to track funding flows to WROs across country teams and affiliates. • <i>Alternative forms of funding:</i> To be more sustainable, WROs need support identifying alternative forms of funding, and Oxfam could help with this effort. • <i>Long-term project timelines:</i> The short-term, project-specific nature of grants from Oxfam was at odds with the long-term nature of WROs’ gender work, which requires tackling deep-rooted gender norms. This pattern makes it difficult to retain staff and build organizational sustainability. • <i>Internal cost recovery (ICR):</i> WROs request ICR to enhance their sustainability. • <i>Equitable funding opportunities:</i> Ensure that all WROs, both big and small, can access funding opportunities from Oxfam and other donors.
Public Engagement	

<p>International actors facilitate direct connections to donors, make visible the role of local and national actors, and acknowledge their contribution in any publications or communication materials.</p>	<p>WHAT WORKED?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Access to donors:</i> Oxfam’s facilitation of direct access to donors, along with training on how to best interact with such donors, was useful.
	<p>WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN FOR OXFAM?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Additional accompaniment with donors:</i> WROs requested additional support on how to interact with donors, as well as translators, so that they can better interact directly with donors. • <i>Different organizational sizes:</i> WROs requested that both small and large organizations, beyond the “blessed few,” gain access to donors via Oxfam. • <i>Shine the light:</i> WROs need to make their efforts more publicly visible, but that takes time and resources. Oxfam and other international actors can help provide that support in order to amplify and recognize the work of WROs.
<p>Influencing</p>	
<p>International actors recognize the responsibility of local and national actors to lead in humanitarian emergencies, and assist in their ability to participate fully in decision-making mechanisms and coordination forums.</p>	<p>WHAT WORKED?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Oxfam’s standing in the humanitarian sector:</i> Oxfam has made use of its position in the humanitarian sector to facilitate the direct access of WROs in coordination and decision-making spaces. • <i>Oxfam’s advocacy expertise:</i> WROs have been able to tap into Oxfam’s advocacy knowledge, which can help amplify the efforts of WROs to move from local to national spaces.
	<p>WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN FOR OXFAM?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Continue to dismantle patriarchal and colonialist structures within the humanitarian system:</i> None of the case studies had specific feedback on how Oxfam can improve but referred to how the system itself poses immense hurdles for the work that WROs are doing. Oxfam’s support in breaking down these barriers is needed, such as facilitating WRO access to decision-making spaces, improving organizational diversity, and network building. This is an enormous challenge, and not one only for Oxfam to work toward. • <i>Allyship and solidarity:</i> WROs are often attacked for their human rights and gender justice work. International actors like Oxfam can and should use their influence to protect the important work of WROs.

4 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to understand the broader context of the humanitarian response to COVID-19 from the perspective of WROs and to understand how well Oxfam has upheld LHL commitments in relation to its partnerships with WROs. From the literature, as well as from Oxfam’s experience in Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya, it is evident that WROs have been key figures in the COVID-19 response while also managing acute challenges around lack of recognition, inadequate funding, and exclusion from decision-making spaces. Local organizations, including WROs, have continued their work in humanitarian response, shouldering even more when international actors had to reduce their participation. As noted in the three case studies, WROs helped fill gaps in Oxfam’s ability to respond to the pandemic, such as by embedding self-care in their response in Colombia, providing gender-specific expertise on legal issues in Iraq, and reaching urban communities in Kenya. As stated in the Colombia case study, “Partner organizations possess essential knowledge for humanitarian response. Without them, the action of international organizations and agencies is unfeasible and impermanent.”

This chapter ties together research on the impact of COVID-19 on WROs and international actors’ support for them with the evaluative component on how well Oxfam supported WROs in the COVID-19 response in Colombia, Iraq, and Kenya.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Before going into the LHL principles, one key learning from this evaluative research involves whether WROs should be considered humanitarian actors. Research by the Feminist Humanitarian Network, ActionAid, and others makes the case that WROs are indeed humanitarian actors as they are doing humanitarian work. Yet the Oxfam case studies, particularly the one in Colombia, showed that not all WROs are concerned with or want to be considered humanitarian actors; they see that label as divorcing them from their rights focus or indicating a lack of a deep-rooted commitment to the communities in which they work. It is a powerful consideration to keep in mind, as it speaks volumes about how humanitarian work can be seen as short term and disconnected from communities and the structures of power that underpin vulnerability and resilience.

Yet this issue with labeling persists. It is tied to tangible and powerful considerations such as funding and invitations into coordination and decision-making spaces—places that are still controlled and led by international actors with specific perceptions of who should be included or not. Therefore, the issue is not as simple as thinking WROs do not want to be called humanitarian actors but still are doing humanitarian work, as it risks rendering their work invisible. Ultimately it appears that the onus should not be on WROs to label their work differently or in ways that make their value more obvious to international actors, as that would be an unfair burden. Instead it is the responsibility of the international actor-dominated system to rethink what organizations are involved in humanitarian work and the different perspectives regarding response they bring. Efforts to acknowledge the work of WROs is helpful, but more needs to be done. Thinking of more practical ways to break down the humanitarian-development-peace divide and to work more within the nexus can be a strategy moving forward, as it brings a more holistic, inclusive, and long-term approach to response.

The following sections unpack the overall learnings around the LHL principles both from the external literature and from the Oxfam case studies and Oxfam literature.

PARTNERSHIPS

	Learning from the literature review	Learning from case studies
Partnerships	Partnerships should shift power towards WROs, build trust, and be context specific.	Partnerships should offer learning opportunities, involve continuous and open dialogue, be flexible, and focus on the long term. Efforts should be made to partner with organizations functioning with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

The literature review shows that partnerships with WROs should shift power towards the WROs, build trust, and embrace the need to be context specific. As important as this advice is, it is hard to know how to implement power shifts in practice. The learnings from Oxfam via its partners can shed some light on how to practically tackle power dynamics within a partnership via mutual learning opportunities, genuine and open dialogue, a strong element of flexibility, and an eye to the long-term horizon. Oxfam is doing some of this work well, and other areas—such as moving to long-term partnerships—require more effort. Oxfam should also rethink not only *how* to partner but also *who* to partner with in its humanitarian work—specifically WROs that may be seen more as development organizations. But, as this research has noted, the labels “humanitarian” and “development” reflect how international actors like Oxfam function, but they do not reflect how local actors work and therefore should be changed. Oxfam should also be more explicit about how to build trust within partnerships with staff and partners, a process that involves being open, accepting, and vulnerable and sharing power among all those involved.

CAPACITY SHARING

	Learning from the literature review	Learning from case studies
Capacity Sharing	Conceptual clarity is required on what is meant by capacity—is it building, sharing, or strengthening? Practical implementation of capacity focuses on building and strengthening activities more than sharing.	Oxfam needs to figure out conceptual clarity in relation to capacity. Keep in mind that WROs do not require capacity to become humanitarian actors. Dialogue with WROs is needed to identify what is necessary for WROs to be sustainable and support humanitarian work.

In this research, it was a challenge to talk about capacity in relation to WROs specifically and LHL generally. While pro-LHL international actors want to talk about capacity *sharing*, in practice capacity *building* activities still hold sway. Rhetoric is not matched by real-life actions. Oxfam is no different and could serve as an example to the sector by illustrating conceptual clarity between these terms with examples from across the Confederation. For instance, Oxfam Colombia’s knowledge sharing frame instead of capacity building can be an important example to share and learn more from within the Confederation.

Also important to underscore is the tendency to see WROs as a sector that needs capacity to become humanitarian actors—that is, they require “fixing.” WROs may or may not appreciate capacity training, such as information on humanitarian principles, but it is a problem when WROs are seen as weak or imperfect as opposed to strong and knowledgeable entities in their own right. As with partnerships, open dialogue is needed with WROs on what their strengths are and how Oxfam can support them to have even stronger capacity.

FUNDING

	Learning from the literature review	Learning from case studies
Funding	<p>Recognize that funding processes can be opaque, complex, and overly stringent.</p> <p>Minimal funding, or diversion of funding away from WROs, creates an unfair and competitive environment.</p> <p>Short-term, project-specific funds are unsustainable.</p>	<p>More funding needs to be allocated to WROs.</p> <p>Funding needs to be equitable.</p> <p>Funding needs to be flexible.</p> <p>Funding needs to have long-term timelines and provide internal cost recovery (ICR).</p> <p>Funding needs to come with decision-making power.</p>

WROs welcomed funding from Oxfam, particularly as WROs saw donor funds fleeing from them and going toward other actors involved in COVID-19 response. However, it appears that humanitarian funding to WROs from Oxfam has dropped considerably, so it is worth a conversation internally to understand why that occurred and how that can be changed. While the case studies did not describe Oxfam’s funding processes as difficult, dialogue with WROs can help clarify whether there are additional ways that Oxfam can simplify processes and assessments.

Evidence from the case studies underscores that Oxfam can do more to ensure that its funding decisions are equitable in terms of providing grants to small WROs in addition to large ones. And if Oxfam is funding WROs to better engage in humanitarian response, sustainability is a core part of that support, which needs to be accompanied by long-term timelines and ICR. Lastly, WROs shared that they want more decision-making power over the use of the funds instead of being relegated to being an “implementing partner.”

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

	Learning from the literature review	Learning from case studies
Public Engagement	<p>Recognize that visibility can translate into power.</p> <p>More WRO-led communication, research, and other products are needed.</p>	<p>More WRO involvement in visibility efforts for and by local actors (websites, blogs, joint branding) is needed.</p> <p>Connect with donors, with support from Oxfam.</p>

More visibility of WROs, for WROs by WROs, is needed. Apart from a series of research reports by the Feminist Humanitarian Network, most of the information about the work that WROs were doing on COVID-19 still tends to be produced by international actors like ActionAid and Oxfam. This tendency may not be seen as an obvious problem; it can be helpful to have someone talking about the important work WROs are doing. But sharing information, whether it is a policy brief or a research report, is an act of power, and those who create it decide what gets said, what gets left out, and whose voices are included. WROs telling their own stories is an important shift of power that needs to happen more frequently. Oxfam, as shown in the previous sections, has been making strong progress in terms of shining a light on the contributions of local partners, including WROs, in its public communications.

INFLUENCING

	Learning from the literature review	Learning from case studies
Influencing	<p>WROs are excluded from decision-making spaces.</p> <p>Recognize that participation is not enough to have impact—engagement must go beyond the superficial.</p>	<p>Oxfam’s brand and reputation have been and should continue to be used to open doors for WROs.</p> <p>Make use of Oxfam’s convening power to bring together stakeholders (WROs, local actors, international actors, donors, etc.).</p>

During the COVID-19 pandemic response, WROs continued to struggle to take part in coordination and decision-making spaces. This situation affects which services or issue areas get attention and jeopardizes attention to the needs of women and girls. Yet getting into these spaces is not enough; there is a well-researched body of literature on the importance of *meaningful* participation. For women and WROs to be able to participate and get their viewpoints across, they need to be able to, among other things, be present, demonstrate agency, and have the confidence to express their interests (UN Women 2018). It is critical to be conscious of Oxfam’s power, in terms of both how Oxfam’s power can open doors for WROs and how Oxfam’s power can prevent meaningful participation of WROs and other local actors. It is worth asking whether it is possible for power dynamics to be equalized in a space that includes international actors in addition to local and national actors, or whether international actors will always end up dominating the space. Being conscious of Oxfam’s power—knowing when to step in and when to step back—is a difficult balance but essential if Oxfam is to keep to its LHL principles and commitments.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This evaluative research report highlights the work that WROs have been doing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic—it looks at their strengths and the challenges they face, as well as how Oxfam has been trying to support their work. Adopting a feminist approach that pays close attention to unequal gender norms, incorporates an intersectional lens, and delves into power dynamics, this study provides a clear assessment of the ways that Oxfam—and other international actors—can better support WROs involved in humanitarian response.

Another key aspect of a feminist approach is the commitment to ensuring that findings can be used to catalyze social change and activism. The recommendations detailed in the section above offer several practical though perhaps challenging suggestions on how that can be achieved, from including ICR for partners to creating more equitable learning exchanges where Oxfam and partners

can learn from each other. Additional practical suggestions no doubt exist, and we recommend that Oxfam—and other international actors for that matter—create space for frank dialogue with their WRO partners to discuss other ways they can be supported.

Yet these recommendations cannot be divorced from their feminist underpinnings, which should be in line with Oxfam’s commitment to feminist principles. Tied to these feminist principles should be an equal commitment to a decolonial approach that further unpacks power dynamics to “recognize positionality and power across the global North-South” as an ongoing process of mutual learning and solidarity (Kagal and Latchford 2020, 18). In addition, LHL is more in line with a decolonial approach that seeks to end the idea that international organizations are the “experts” compared with local ones. As shared by Hero Anwar, the program director of REACH, a humanitarian organization in Iraq, “the path to local leadership and the path to decolonizing aid appear to be one” (Oxfam International 2022a, 5).

More discussions need to happen internally on what committing to a feminist and decolonial approach means and on engaging with the discomfort that will ensue when a global actor such as Oxfam casts a critical lens on its work and the power it wields. Such discussions could even reflect on whether it is possible for feminist and decolonial approaches to be incorporated in how the humanitarian and development sectors are currently constructed or whether the sectors themselves need to be dismantled. This would require Oxfam and other international actors to rethink their roles and position in these structures and how maintaining the status quo may inadvertently be perpetuating unequal dynamics with local actors such as WROs. Conversations also must occur between Oxfam and its partners, namely WROs, on practices that could be incorporated to improve relationships. Lastly, it is important to recognize that Oxfam is just one actor in the sector, and several of the recommendations cannot be carried out by Oxfam alone. Changes to better support WROs in the humanitarian sector need a joint response from a diverse set of actors, including INGOs, UN agencies, donors, governments, and others.

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NOTES

- 1 The case studies can be found here: <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/centering-womens-rights-organizations-evaluative-research>
- 2 Oxfam is a confederation of 21 affiliate organizations and the international secretariat in Nairobi. When referring to the Confederation, this report will use either “Oxfam” or the “Confederation.” When speaking about a specific affiliate or country office, the report will describe by name (e.g., Oxfam America or Oxfam Colombia). The affiliates work with country offices around the world, which are distinguished with an “in” (e.g., Oxfam in Iraq or Oxfam in Kenya), which again will be specified throughout the report.
- 3 The Charter for Change is an eight-point agreement that international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) agree to follow to address inequality in the global humanitarian system (see www.charter4change.org).
- 4 The Grand Bargain (2.0) is an agreement among large donors and humanitarian organizations to increase high-quality funding to support effective and efficient humanitarian action and to support local leadership (see <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>).
- 5 The Pledge for Change is committed to reimagining the role of INGOs in the global aid system, focusing on three key areas: equitable partnerships, authentic storytelling, and influencing wider change. The Pledge does not include specific language on gender or women’s rights (see <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pledge-change>).
- 6 In addition to these LHL-specific global frameworks, Oxfam has made commitments to support local leadership through other initiatives such as the “Call to Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies” (a global initiative to drive change and foster accountability from the humanitarian system to address gender-based violence) and the “Pledge on Meaningful Refugee Participation” (Oxfam 2020b).
- 7 These principles pertain to Oxfam America, not necessarily to the wider Oxfam Confederation.
- 8 Note that these principles can interrelate and depend on one another; for example, partnerships can lead to increased funding, which can support capacity-sharing opportunities, which can lead to additional funding opportunities.
- 9 As of 2021, the Feminist Humanitarian Network comprises 74 members, of which 45 are women’s rights organizations. Eleven are international organizations. The rest are individual members. Oxfam is not an organizational member, though Oxfam staff members hold individual FHN memberships. This report did a random selection of two women’s rights organizations each from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. From the Pacific, only one entity was selected as there is only one organization from the region that is a member of the FHN. The nine organizations are the following: Crown the Woman (Africa – South Sudan), Kiaswa Initiative (Africa – Kenya), Tewa (Asia – Nepal), Badabon Sangho (Asia – Bangladesh), Ecuadorian Centre for the Promotion of Women (LAC – Ecuador), Civil Association of Family Planning (LAC – Venezuela), Shashat Women Cinema (Middle East – Palestine), Marsa (Middle East – Lebanon), and the Shifting the Power Coalition (Pacific – multiple countries).
- 10 An internal discussion is on whether “country teams” is an inclusive term or not; an alternative term is “closest to impact.”
- 11 Oxfam-specific literature will be discussed in the following section.
- 12 Regarding humanitarian principles, “different humanitarian actors subscribe to different humanitarian principles, but the four principles considered core are humanity (that human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found), independence (not acting as instruments of a government’s foreign policy), impartiality (prioritizing aid based on need alone and without respect to the race, religion, or nationality of the recipients), and neutrality

- (traditionally that humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities but more recently often narrowed to the notion that they should not use aid to further a particular political or religious standpoint). As a rights-based organization, Oxfam intentionally does not adhere to the principle of neutrality, as traditionally defined, and, indeed, neutrality has not been included as a core principle in the Core Humanitarian Standard” (Gingerich et al. 2017, 16).
- 13 The Principles of Partnership focus on the following: equality, transparency, results-oriented approach, responsibility, and complementarity. Note that one of the challenges highlighted in integrating the principles is need for them to be contextualized (ICVA n.d.).
 - 14 Note that different affiliates and country offices have made slight modifications to the feminist principles to adapt to their contexts.
 - 15 As a signatory to the now-defunct Agenda for Humanity, Oxfam made several commitments on the gender justice and women’s rights front, including and not limited to the following: Oxfam will increase financial support and level of engagement with WROs to engage in humanitarian preparedness, response, and influence (Oxfam International 2016).
 - 16 <https://www.calltoactiongbv.com/what-we-do>
 - 17 While all Oxfam affiliates and country teams are committed to gender justice and feminist principles, individual Oxfams often have a specific focus. Oxfam Canada and Oxfam Colombia, for instance, center women’s rights in their work. Oxfam South Africa prioritizes social justice and inequality work.
 - 18 *Nyumba kumi* initiatives are a form of community policing (Njagi 2020).
 - 19 Note that the report by Vera and Brusola-Vera discusses the humanitarian-development nexus and not the humanitarian-development-peace nexus; hence, peace is left out of this paragraph.

ANNEX

Region	Country	Name	Mission/Mandate
Africa	South Sudan	Crown the Woman	Crown the Woman – South Sudan (CREW) is a women-founded and women-led nonprofit, nongovernmental, non-political, humanitarian and national grassroots organization that aims at empowering girls and women to ensure they harness their potential and contribute to nation building economically, socially, and politically. It was established and registered in 2016 by concerned young South Sudanese women who realized the need to promote meaningful gender equality and equity as well as the need to recognize, appreciate, strengthen, and empower women. CREW strives for realization and respect of women’s rights, enhancement of women’s security, and the prioritization and provision of women’s basic needs. CREW has a special focus on investing in young women and children as the means of securing the future of South Sudan’s women in nation building and development.
Africa	Kenya	Kiaswa	Kiambu Sex Workers Association is a sex worker-led group operating in Kiambu to offer sexual reproductive [services]. We work with female sex workers, male sex workers, trans sex workers, and LGBTQ sex workers, as well as clients of sex workers.
Asia	Nepal	Tewa	Tewa supports all women to organize and raise their voices collectively for economic growth opportunities by strengthening women’s rights and transforming discriminatory policies, systems, norms, and practices at all levels. Tewa emphasizes community philanthropy, capacity development, movement building, networking, and collaborations with like-minded organizations of self-reliance and creating an equitable society.
Asia	Bangladesh	Badabon Sangho	The mission of Badabon Sangho is to build up the capacity of disadvantaged, vulnerable, and socially excluded women and girls toward improving their livelihoods and movement building, in order to challenge the social structural processes that deny women’s rights. To make it happen, firstly, Badabon Sangho continued to build up the capacity of group members and their leaders and federation members in organizing, planning, and public speaking. Hence, they can lead their movement for land, water bodies, racial justice, climate justice, labor rights, and violence against women and girls. Secondly, we aim to be a renowned organization of women’s rights groups, exhibiting women’s equal rights to land and water bodies regardless of caste and religion.
Latin America and the Caribbean	Belize	Belize Family Life Association	BFLA is the only nonprofit, nongovernment organization in Belize that focuses exclusively on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Through its network of six clinics, BFLA provides general health services in addition to gynecological care, Pap tests, pregnancy tests, abortion services, pre- and post-natal services, child immunization, and STI and HIV testing. The outreach program runs from three mobile clinics, which offer family planning information and services in areas that are not easily accessible.

Latin America and the Caribbean	Venezuela	Asociación Civil de Planificación Familiar (Civil Association of Family Planning Venezuela)	ACPF contributes to the empowerment of people through comprehensive sexuality education, facilitating access to diversified services and programs based on human rights, with a gender perspective, and advocating for the promotion and defense of sexual and reproductive rights.
Middle East	Palestine	Shashat Women Cinema	Shashat Women Cinema is a nongovernmental organization. Since its founding in 2005, its main focus has been the capacity building of young Palestinian women filmmakers in its commitment to have women be producers of a vibrant and modern Palestinian culture. Its activities are informed by the belief that gender equality is the foundation of sustainable and democratic development. Its board is composed of filmmakers, cultural workers, and academics.
Middle East	Lebanon	Marsa	Marsa Sexual Health Center provides sexual and reproductive health services with a multidisciplinary team in a safe, welcoming, accessible, and friendly environment that is free of judgment and bias with a focus on women, vulnerable groups, and economically disadvantaged populations.
Pacific	Multiple	Shifting the Power Coalition	A Pacific women-led feminist humanitarian network, Shifting the Power Coalition was established in 2016. It brings together 13 women-led civil society organizations in six countries working together to support diverse women's leadership in humanitarian action at local, national, and regional levels. We are the only women-led regional alliance focused on strengthening the collective power, influence, and leadership of diverse Pacific women in responding to disasters and climate change.

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